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This article deals with Hayden White's chapter on Giambattista Vico's tropological model of historical transformation, which is part of his seminal collection of essays *Tropics of Discourse*. Focussing on White's understanding of how Vico could inspire a critical history of historiographic consciousness, it is demonstrated how his reading of Vico's poetics of irony opens up a creative tension between discourse and the world, which can serve as a theoretical framework for liberty and critique in historiography.

Keywords: Hayden White; Giambattista Vico; tropes; consciousness.

White leitor de Giambattista Vico: o verdadeiro no falso e as irónicas condições da liberdade historiográfica

Este artigo analisa o capítulo que Hayden White dedicou ao modelo tropológico de transformação histórica de Giambattista Vico na sua seminal coleção de ensaios *Tropics of Discourse*. Focando a interpretação de White sobre o modo como Vico poderia inspirar uma história crítica da consciência historiográfica, demonstra-se que a sua leitura das poéticas da ironia de Vico abre espaço para uma tensão criativa entre o discurso e o mundo, que pode servir como enquadramento teórico para a liberdade e a crítica na historiografia.

Palavras-chave: Hayden White; Giambattista Vico; tropos; consciência.

White reading Giambattista Vico: the false in the true and the ironic conditions of historiographic liberty

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The work of Giambattista Vico, in particular his *New Science*, has played a foundational role in Hayden White's "history of conscience".¹ Following the precept that any historical work is both a narrative and an empirical enterprise, White used Vico's poetic analytical framework in his first book *Metahistory*,² published in 1973. In the course of chapters dedicated to the writings of the great historians and philosophers of the 19th century – Hegel, Michelet, Ranke, Burckhardt, Tocqueville, Marx, Nietzsche, Croce – White showed that their texts produce the effects of truth through the use of emplotment mechanisms related to four rhetorical tropes inspired by Vico: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. The ideal of historical objectivity finds itself thus confronted with the observation that, rather than simply *illustrating* historical facts, tropes *constitute* them as real events. In 1976, White further expanded his reflections on Vico's tropological history in his article "The Tropics of History: The Deep Structure of the *New Science*", which was republished in 1978 in the collection of essays *Tropics of Discourse*.³

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1 From 1978 onwards, this focus led White to work at the *History of Consciousness* department of the University of California at Santa Cruz.

2 Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). Having previously acted as co-editor for the proceedings of the big symposium organized in 1968 to commemorate Vico's 300th birthday, White already possessed in-depth knowledge of the author's work. See Hayden White and Giorgio Tagliacozzo, eds., *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969).

3 Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 197-216.

Through a reading of this later article, I would like to focus on White's understanding of how Vico could inspire a critical history of historiographical consciousness. Let us start with a brief overview of the article's structure. White begins by providing us with an understanding of the significance of *New Science* for the social and cultural sciences, relating Vico's ideas to 19th century foundational figures like Hegel and Marx. He deals in particular with Vico's cyclical model of gentile history and its tension with the linear perspective of Christian European civilization. Coming to terms with this tension provides the background for an extended discussion of the epistemic role of speech and tropes in the transformations of gentile consciousness. White concludes by drawing out the implications of what he conceives as a theory of linguistic transformation applied to consciousness and its objects for a non-dualistic perspective.

As White demonstrates, we owe to Vico a conceptual framework for the analysis of social and cultural phenomena which prefigures the rise of the human and social sciences of the 19th century. In Vico's thought, the explanation of their core features relies on the "convertibility" of the 'true' and the 'fabricated', or the principle of *verum ipsum factum*.⁴ The idea is that humans can only know what they have made or what in principle they would be able to make. As they are incapable of creating the physical world conceived by God, their knowledge of this world can only be incomplete. The specificity of this science of society and culture is located in the role given to consciousness and speech:

[m]en's relationship with their worlds, social and natural, was mediated by consciousness in a crucial way, and especially by speech, which was not for Vico merely a verbal representation of the world of praxis, a reproduction in a consciousness of the world of things and the actual relations between them, but a reproductive and creative, active and inventive power.⁵

4 White, "The Tropics," 197.

5 White, "The Tropics," 199.

Here Vico anticipates Georg Lukacs's critique of the Marxist concept of false consciousness, according to which the capacity of the mind to create false representations regarding the relations between men and the world is not an obstacle to knowledge. On the contrary, it opens up the possibility of changing, revising and reforming the actual world. As we shall see, error is not opposed to truth, but viewed as part of it.

According to White, the gradual process of creating knowledge through consciousness and speech reflects Hegel's idealistic view of world history. Particular societies are submitted to cycles of growth and decline while culture in general is seen as essentially progressive throughout its cyclical recurrences. With Vico, this adopts the form of a superposition of two major types of civilization: the gentile one, which is subject to the cyclical law of *corso* and *ricorso*, and Hebrew and Christian civilization, which, having taken advantage of divine revelation, is exempt of this process. Because of this direct relationship to divine knowledge, Hebrews and Christians do not have the indirect relationship to creation which characterizes the gentile worldview and, as a result, the problem of the interpretation of the world does not concern them. Based on this insight, Vico seeks to understand how gentile civilizations, such as the Greeks and the Romans, could have reached their high level of sophistication. What is the relation between their cyclical histories and the progressive ones of the Hebrews and Romans?

Similar to Edward Said's reading of Vico in his book *Beginnings. Intention and Method*,⁶ White focuses on the interpretative processes which define relations to the gentile world and make Vico the first to conceive a "hermeneutical principle".⁷ Here, speech both allows us to understand cultural phenomena and to develop the categories required to grasp the evolution of a culture. Vico distinguishes poetical expression from representations in prose: while the former is of hermeneutical

6 Edward Said, *Beginnings. Intention and Method* (London: Granta Books, 1997 [1975]).

7 White, "The Tropics," 203.

nature and constitutes an active and creative force, the latter is a passive reflection of the way things are. For White,

[t]he effect of these two aspects of speech on consciousness set up a tension, within consciousness itself, that generates a tendency of thought to transcend itself and to create out of the sensed inadequacy of language to its object the conditions for the exercise of its essential freedom.⁸

White therefore starts an enquiry into the nature of the creative force of language and, in order to respond, he refers to the second book of *New Science*, in which Vico outlines his theory of metaphor. At stake is a “poetic logic” designating the forms through which things as they are apprehended by primitive man are signified.⁹ “Poetic logic” refers to the working of primitive consciousness, allowing for the interpretation of its creations. In this respect, two fields interact: metaphysics, concerning things in the forms of their being, and logic, pertaining to the forms through which the former can be expressed. In the “poetic logic” of primitive men, thought moves in a certain direction, from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and from the concrete to the abstract. This implies that “the forms through which things are signified” should be interpreted as a projection on the unfamiliar of attributes held to be characteristic of the familiar. Thus, “(...) poetic logic has, by virtue of the original metaphorical nature of its contents, its own inner dynamic or, as we might say, dialectic, so that the relationship between language and the world of things is not simply reflexive”.¹⁰ In this respect, the speech figures or tropes make up the “sensory topics of primitive man”,¹¹ which are divided into the four tropical modalities mentioned

8 *Idem*.

9 Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Finch (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1968), § 400.

10 White, “The Tropics,” 204.

11 Vico, *The New Science*, § 495.

in the beginning: metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy and irony.¹² Each of them designates steps in a transformative process extending in an arc where one end is occupied by metaphor and the other one by irony. While metaphor is intimately linked to the act of naming the things of the world, irony designates the opposite: the entrance into a language of prose. Metaphor is understood as a generic trope that relates to synecdoche and metonymy as its refinements. For White, this transformative model is about “(…) the tension between things and the words used to characterize them which makes further specification of the nature of things necessary and the further refinement of language possible by tropological variation”.¹³ Let us add that, here, White’s earlier idealist reading of Vico through Hegel is qualified, as he notes that the most primitive metaphorical types of identification are related to corporal and emotional experiences.¹⁴

Contrary to the modern poet, who is able to distinguish between figurative and literal language, in Vico’s account primitive man understands figures and allegories as literal representations of the exterior world. Irony marks the exit of this consciousness towards a state in which “(…) language itself has become an object of reflection, and the sensed inadequacy of language to the full representation of its objects has become perceived as a problem”.¹⁵ If irony presupposes an awareness of the distinction between true and false, it also offers the possibility of presenting a lie as truth and, therefore, for White irony is foundational for all sciences that seek both to produce true statements about the world and to denounce the inadequacy of figurative descriptions.

White notes that Vico’s cyclical evolutionary model is not unique in the history of ideas. His originality rather resides in the “...construction of a model by which both the stages in the evolution of consciousness can be defined and the transitions from one to the other of

¹² Vico, *The New Science*, § 404-09.

¹³ White, “The Tropics,” 206.

¹⁴ For an analysis of this corporal dimension in the work of Vico, see Maria-Benedita Basto, “Corps poétique et critique démocratique. Vico et l’humanisme engagé chez Edward Said,” *Tumultes* 2, no. 35 (2010): 103-17.

¹⁵ White, “The Tropics,” 207.

them can be accounted for in terms of ‘the modifications of the human mind’”.¹⁶ This strict analogy between tropological transformations in language and changes in consciousness and society open up the way for a particular kind of dialectic. Rather than being based on an interplay between thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis, it is “(...) the dialectic of the exchange between language and the reality it seeks to contain”.¹⁷

The author reminds us of the difference in Vico’s thought between gentile civilizations, in which the ironic trope ultimately leads to hyper-scepticism and the loss of virtue, and the Europeans’ Christian civilization, where the truths of religion save them from such an outcome. However, White stresses that it is also the point of view of Christian truth which allows Vico to adopt an ironical and self-conscious position with respect to gentile history. This detachment provides Vico with the possibility of considering their histories as “(...) purely autonomous processes of development, governed by Providence only insofar as it provided, in the constitution of human nature itself as body, mind, and speech, the three variables whose interactions the pagan histories represent”.¹⁸

To conclude, let us return to the question of the relationship between consciousness and language, which Hayden White sought to apprehend by using Vico’s model of a tropological history. In the introduction of *Tropics of Discourse*, White observes:

“Our discourse always tends to slip away from our data towards the structures of consciousness with which we are trying to grasp them; or, what amounts to the same thing, the data always resist the coherency of the image which we are trying to fashion of them”.¹⁹

16 White, “The Tropics,” 209.

17 *Idem*.

18 White, “The Tropics,” 215.

19 Hayden White, “Introduction: Tropology, Discourse, and the Modes of Human Consciousness,” in *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 1-25, 1.

In *Metahistory*, White seeks to show, through plotmaking, that Western discourse on the history of consciousness basically used four tropes. They were used to bring out differences among founders of the discipline. However, according to Stephen Bann,²⁰ the way such a “poetic logic” worked lay diachronically outside of its scope. Bann reminds us that, in contrast, *Tropics of Discourse* focuses on the analogy between metaphorical transformation and the transformation of consciousness in history. In this process, irony plays a particular role, because, as we have seen, it produces a situation in which language itself becomes an object of reflection, opening up a critical space within scientific discourse. According to White, Vico reverses “the relationship between the components of ironic consciousness so that the false is seen not to oppose the true, but to be contained within it as the necessary stage in the attainment of the whole truth”.²¹ Here, the inadequacy of discourse in relation to its object creates the conditions for the exercise of liberty in historiography. When Vico overcame the dualisms of his age with a “third alternative”,²² this also involved the mutual containment of other terms, such as life and death, savagery and civilization, humanity and bestiality. In this respect, White’s reading of Vico may also provide a blueprint for a critical analysis of colonial and postcolonial representations.

20 Stephen Bann, “History: Myth and Narrative: A Coda for Roland Barthes and Hayden White,” in *Re-Figuring Hayden White*, ed. Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domańska, and Hans Kellner (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 144-64, 154.

21 White, “The Tropics,” 216.

22 White, “The Tropics,” 217.

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