THE FIFTH ANNUAL HISTORY AND THEORY LECTURE

INTENTION AND IRONY: THE MISSED ENCOUNTER BETWEEN HAYDEN WHITE AND QUENTIN SKINNER

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ABSTRACT

No contemporary intellectual historian has produced more influential reflections on the historian’s craft than Hayden White and Quentin Skinner, yet their legacy has never been meaningfully compared. Doing so reveals a surprising complementarity in their approach, at least to the extent that Skinner’s stress on recovering the intentionality of authors fits well with White’s observation that irony is the dominant rhetorical mode of historical narrative in our day. Irony itself, to be sure, has to be divided broadly speaking into its dramatic or Socratic variants and the unstable and paradoxical alternative defended by poststructuralist critics. The latter produced in White an anxiety about the anarchistic implications of an allegedly inherent undecidability in historical interpretation and narration, which threatened to conflate history entirely with fiction. By recovering the necessary role of intentionality as a prerequisite for a more moderate version of Socratic and dramatic irony—in which hindsight provides some purchase on a truth denied actors at the time history is made—it is possible to rescue an ironic attitude that can register the frequency of unintended consequences without surrendering to the conclusion that no explanation or interpretation is superior to another. Against yet a third alternative, which tries to reconstruct the past rationally as a prelude to the present, acknowledging the ironic undermining of intentions avoids giving all the power to the contemporary historian and restores a dialogic balance between actors in the past and their present-day interpreters.

Keywords: intentionality, irony, radical reconstruction, Hayden White, Quentin Skinner, illocutionary

Arguably the most influential Anglophone philosophers/practitioners of history of the past forty years are Hayden White (b. 1928) and Quentin Skinner (b. 1940). Both first made their marks with major works in the 1970s, White with Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe in 1973 and Skinner with his two-volume Foundations of Modern Political Thought in 1978.

1. This paper is a revised version of the fifth History and Theory Lecture, presented on October 25, 2012 at Columbia University in New York. The History and Theory Lecture is given annually, and is jointly sponsored by History and Theory and the Consortium for Intellectual and Cultural History centered at Columbia University (http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cich/ [accessed December 5, 2012]).

2. For an introduction to Skinner’s work, see Kari Palonen, Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003); for White’s, see Herman Paul, Hayden White: The Historical Imagination (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011). My thanks to Mark Bevir, Peter Gordon, David Hollinger, and Sinai Rusinek for their responses to earlier drafts, to Julian Bourg for commenting on the paper at the event at Columbia, and to Ethan Kleinberg and Samuel Moyn for the honor of inviting me to deliver the 2012 History and Theory Lecture.

Both have been inspired in one way or another by what has come to be called “the linguistic turn” in the human sciences. Both have been drawn to the performative rather than representational functions of language, while nonetheless resisting the conclusion that the past is inherently a “text” to be read hermeneutically or deconstructively. Both have been attracted more to rhetoric than to philosophy, especially as it was mobilized by early modern thinkers like Vico, in White’s case, and Hobbes and Machiavelli, in Skinner’s. Both have disdained the call to include history among the social sciences, preferring to stress instead its humanist affinities. And both continue to generate considerable controversy over what it means to write history in general and the history of ideas or concepts in particular.

Yet, to my knowledge, neither figure has spent any time reflecting on the implications of the other’s work, nor has a sustained literature emerged that compares their legacies. As Kari Palonen notes, “rather surprising is the lack of connection between Skinner and the rhetorical historiography practiced by Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit in particular.” There are, of course, obvious reasons for the mutual disregard. Their interest in linguistic theory has focused on very different aspects of that vast and incoherent human phenomenon we call language. In Skinner’s case, it has been the later Wittgenstein’s stress on language as use combined with the speech act theory associated with J. L. Austin and John Searle, whereas White has drawn more on the structuralist narratology of literary theorists like Kenneth Burke, Northrop Frye, and Roland Barthes. As a result, Skinner’s approach has been contextualist and historicist, whereas White in contrast is defiantly formalist, indeed, some would argue, more transcendental in his conclusions than genuinely historical. And despite their common appreciation of the importance of rhetoric, Skinner interprets it largely in terms of the arts of persuasion, whereas White is fixated on the recurrent tropological and figural patterns that subtend any discursive act.

It is, however, primarily because of the very different centers of gravity in their understanding of the historical field that they seem incompatible, focusing on different levels of historical research and writing. For Skinner, the weightier force in that field is the actual historical moment that the historian is trying to recreate and represent, the moment in which agents intervened intentionally to recreate thought.


4. For an overview of the fortunes of the “linguistic turn” in historical studies in general, see Judith Surkis, “When Was the Linguistic Turn? A Genealogy,” American Historical Review 117, no. 3 (June, 2012). Interestingly, neither White nor Skinner figures in her account.

5. Palonen, Quentin Skinner, 169.

6. White, to be sure, did invoke Austin in his account of “Writing in the Middle Voice,” Stanford Literature Review 9, no. 2 (Fall, 1992), 187, where he claimed that Barthes’s notion of intransitive writing somehow was like Austin’s notion of the performative dimension of speech acts. Here he tacitly agreed with Skinner’s stress on intentionality as entailed in the act, not as a motive prior to it, but didn’t develop its implications.

7. White more recently has sought to overcome the stark opposition between formalism and contextualism in considering, for example, the approach of the New Historicians. See his “Formalist and Contextualist Strategies in Historical Explanation,” in Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). But his own work has remained indifferent to contextualist explanations.
make something happen. Against attempts to fix the proper meaning of a word for all time, Skinner follows Wittgenstein in stressing its use in specific forms of life or historical contexts. For White, who agrees that atemporal meanings are impossible to determine, it is nonetheless the present moment, or at least that of the post-facto historical representation of the past, that is most important, the moment in which “history” is a story told about the past, not actions or events that happened in it. As a result, whereas Skinner hopes to thwart the presentist inclination to see the past as the origin of a narrative whose telos is the current moment, White follows Croce in defending the idea that “all history is contemporary history,” thus emphasizing the inevitable role of our pretheoretical, tropological, and ideological investments in shaping the narratives we fashion. In one of the few explicit contrasts between the two, Michael Roth characterizes their differences in the following terms:

White’s analysis of the formal properties of the text is dependent neither on some notion of author’s intention nor on an appeal to a context, nor even conventions, one knows about independently of the text. Thus White’s attempt to articulate how a text achieves its effects is very far from, let’s say, Quentin Skinner’s effort to get at what it really does.8

For Skinner, “what a text really does” is more often what its author intends it to do, what speech-act theorists call the “illocutionary force” rather than “perlocutionary effect” dimension of a speech act.9 That is, it involves the intention expressed in saying or writing something more than its success in bringing about what is intended. Skinner is also careful to distinguish putative motives, which are psychological states antecedent to the actual production of the speech act, from the intentions embodied in it.10 Rather than “intentions to do” something, they are “intentions in doing it.” Against those who search for the meaning of texts outside of such authorial intentions, for example New Critics who trust only the tale and never the teller, Skinner holds fast to the claim that without taking into account what authors intend in their verbal actions, the meaning of texts will escape us. He is careful, however, not to claim that meaning is reducible to nothing but authorial intention:

I see no impropriety in speaking of a work’s having a meaning for me which the writer could not have intended. Nor does my thesis conflict with this possibility. I have been concerned only with the converse point that whatever the writer is doing in writing what he writes must be relevant to interpretation, and thus with the claim that amongst the interpreter’s tasks must be the recovery of the writer’s intentions in writing what he writes.11

11. Ibid., 76. Steinberger distinguishes between a stronger and weaker version of Skinner’s intentionalist argument, acknowledging that it is the latter that Skinner protests he upholds (Steinberger, “Analysis and History of Political Thought,” 138).
Discovering how precisely the historian engages in that recovery is, to be sure, a challenging task. Skinner’s suggestion is that we attend to the relevant matrix of conventions through which authors must express their intentions, which allows us to situate them in a polemical field of meaningful alternatives. Although more than mere rationalizations for the acquisition of power or influence, textual interventions are intended performatively to legitimize such goals. For historians to understand a speech act, written or otherwise, they have to be able to situate it against the backdrop of the prevailing conventional context of the time of its enunciation, and also to understand the proximate audience for whom it was intended.

There may be difficulties, as many critics (myself among them), have argued, in establishing what exactly the relevant contexts might have been, or in getting access to them without the intervention of textual evidence that needs to be interpreted in turn. As in the case of situating ideas in the individual experiences of those who generate, defend, or disseminate them, we are faced with the challenging task of knowing how to define experience itself, as well as how to gain access to it in the case of historical figures long dead. We cannot easily bracket what words mean for us today before we try to establish what they may have meant for those who uttered them in the first place. And in addition, some of those who act in history, especially intellectuals, hope their deeds will reach a posterity that extends well beyond the immediate circle serving as their proximate audience.

It may, moreover, be useful, if we are self-conscious about what we are doing, to attempt what has become known as a “rational reconstruction” of the inherent logic of the arguments whose history we are tracing. This might involve, as it does in the work of Jürgen Habermas, a post-facto model of development based on the latent rules underlying the evolution of a tradition of thought. Such a model can even be used as a normative standard against which deviations from the ideal might be measured. Employed more modestly, it makes manifest and clarifies the underlying stakes involved in even the most rhetorically ambiguous texts. A variant of this approach can be found in the attempt of philosophers like Louis Althusser to write the history of political thought as a series of contradictions or aporias that propel later theorists to try to solve on a higher level the unresolved issues left by their predecessors, often leaving aporias of their own to stimulate posterity. As Peter Steinberger has argued,

It is one thing to investigate, as Skinner does, the particular materials of a discursive community—of a “language”—for the purposes of determining how particular terms are used and understood by members of that community. It is quite another to analyze a particular


14. To do so, however, might well be construed as less the historian’s task than that of the social critic. Habermas, whose rational reconstructions are designed with a normative standard in mind, recognizes the distinction in his essay “History and Evolution,” *Telos* 39 (Spring 1979), 5-44.

set of propositions with a view towards discovering and explicating their underlying argumentative structure.  

The result may move the balance of power away from the historical subjects to the writer of history, who is more interested in finding figures in carpets than listening to the hopes or dreams of the weavers. As James Clifford once candidly admitted, speaking of the related approach he called “discourse analysis,” it is “always in a sense unfair to authors. It is interested not in what they have to say or feel as subjects, but is concerned merely with statements as related to other statements in a field.” In embracing this approach, intellectual historians become more like historians of philosophy trying to provide a genealogy for a current position than disinterested narrators of the past, and in so doing often turn proper names into tokens of intellectual arguments rather than references to once living, three-dimensional individuals, whose biographies may complicate the pure implications of their ideas.  

As a result, Skinner’s insight into the heuristic value of seeking to reveal intentions embedded in speech acts, understanding them as actions designed to produce an outcome in a field of competing forces that prevailed at the time of their enunciation, is still in many ways compelling, especially for intellectual historians who may be wary of the teleological threat in rational reconstructions. Its value becomes especially evident when we consider it in the light of Hayden White’s tropological understanding of historical reconstruction. White’s great provocation, still roiling the waters in which practicing historians attempt to swim, is to stress the inevitably figural dimension of all narratives, nonfictional as well as fictional. By showing that our explanations are unconsciously prefigured by a finite set of archetypical emplotments—he singles out tragedy, comedy, satire, and romance—and preconceptual tropes—in particular, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony—White undermines any naïve faith in the presentation of an account that was “wie es eigentlich gewesen.” All history-writing is thus in some sense metahistorical.  

White’s full taxonomic system, which also includes four types of argument (formism, organicism, mechanism, and contextualism) and four dominant ideologies (conservatism, radicalism, liberalism, and anarchism), has been subjected to considerable critical scrutiny, and need not concern us now. What is more important to note for our own purposes is the special place of irony in his scheme. In *Metahistory*, he distinguished it from the other three tropes in several ways. Whereas they are “ naïve” in Schiller’s sense of unreflective, irony is “sentimental” in its self-consciousness about its function as a mode of deliberate negation. Its basic rhetorical tactic is “catachresis,” a misuse of language in which doubts are inspired about what is characterized or the language used to characterize it.

18. In celebrated cases like that of Martin Heidegger’s embrace of Nazism, a lively literature has arisen debating the relevance or lack thereof of political allegiances for broader philosophical questions.
“The aim of the Ironic statement,” he writes, “is to affirm tacitly the negative of what is on the literal level affirmed positively, or the reverse. It presupposes that the reader or auditor already knows, or is capable of recognizing, the absurdity of the characterization of the thing designated in the Metaphor, Metonymy, or Synecdoche used to give form to it.”

Irony, of course, has a long history and comes in many different forms, and there has been no dearth of attempts to unpack its multiple meanings, as well as to explore the ways in which it can work through wordplay, narrative devices, or implicit cues, such as tone of voice or body language. From a concise verbal performance congealed in a pun to the most sprawling cosmic reversal of fortune, irony usually involves some sort of contrast between two levels of meaning, often coded “apparent” and “real.” The claim that it presupposes superior knowledge about what is real on the part of the reader or auditor originates in what is usually called its Socratic version. Here ignorance is feigned by a mentor who possesses a truth that he hopes will ultimately be shared by all concerned. Thus in Plato’s Dialogues, Socrates knows in advance the answers that he induces his interlocutors to reach by their own reasoning power, while all the time slyly pretending that he is ignorant of them. Appearance diverges from reality, but one party is aware of the divergence and the other, at least initially, is not. Like the noble lie defended by Plato, the ironic use of mendacity is understood as a necessary use of dubious means to achieve a positive end, a midwifery of deception in the service of enlightenment. Although sometimes reproached for his lying and distrusted for his negativity, the Socratic ironist, at least since Cicero, is normally exonerated because of the nobility of his motives. In Greek comedies, from which the term is taken, the figure of the eirôn is a dissembler who exposes and deflates the boasting alazôn (braggart) through a duplicitous self-portrayal as someone less clever than he actually is. The seemingly smart guy turns out really to be stupid and vice versa. Thus, it is morally acceptable to heap unearned, hypocritical praise on a braggart in order ultimately to cut him down to size, as it is justifiable to trick an innocent into learning a truth through his own reasoning power.

An alternative kind of irony, especially pertinent to historical narrative, is the dramatic variant that also pits superior knowledge against ignorance. Insofar as the reader of a Socratic dialogue is observing the conversation between a teacher and student, he or she is akin to the audience in a theater. In this case, it is a character in the drama who is unaware of the larger implications of his actions or the meaning of the story of which he is a part. The author of the play or novel allows the audience to share the superior knowledge that trumps the character’s erroneous or at least limited grasp of those implications. In both tragedies—think of Oedipus Rex or Othello—and comedies—an early example is Aristophanes’ The Clouds in which Socrates himself is made the butt of ironic mockery—narrative tension is created by the audience’s awareness of a truth denied to the character, or at least often not revealed until the end of the story.

19. White, Metahistory, 37.
20. There is, of course, an immense literature on Socratic irony. For a challenging recent discussion, which contrasts it with Platonic, see Alexander Nehamas, The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
The relevance of dramatic irony for historical narratives is obvious, even more so than the Socratic variant because of its frequent exploitation of the gap between intentions and outcomes. Insofar as such narratives are post-facto reconstructions of a story that may achieve a meaningful closure not yet available to the actors in it, the knowledge of outcomes can provide ironic distance from the self-understanding of the protagonists. No account of a past war, for example, can fail to expose the illusions of at least one party to the conflict, the one on the losing side, and sometimes in fact both, if victory turns out to be pyrrhic. Insofar as history is often the accumulated result of unintended consequences of acts whose effects may well transcend the hopes and fears of those who wanted to influence their world, it is hard to narrate it without some irony. This is the case not only when positive expectations go awry—the First World War as the “war to end all wars” or a means to “make the world safe for democracy”—but also when catastrophes from one perspective produce positive outcomes from another, as, say, in the case of the fall of pagan Rome and the rise of medieval Christendom. Here posterity can claim superior knowledge, which transcends the limited horizons of those actors who were inevitably ignorant of the outcome.

Such superior knowledge, as in the case of Socratic irony, is grounded in the belief that although appearances may deceive, there is an accessible alternative that more accurately expresses the truth. As White notes, “irony presupposes the occupation of a ‘realistic’ perspective on reality, from which a nonfigurative representation of the world of experience might be provided.” Or as he puts it with reference to Vico’s use of the term, “irony presupposes awareness of the distinction between truth and falsehood, of the possibility of misrepresenting reality in language, and of the difference between a literal and a figurative representation.” Often it is the perspective of temporal distance, allowing a clear-cut narrative pattern to emerge, that seems to make the difference. Thus in the case of historical irony, posterity is like an audience in a theater, which shares the knowledge of the larger truths that escape participants in the action, if not through the author’s foreshadowing of the outcome, then through a direct experience of it at the conclusion of the story.

Or so it seems. For, as we know, “posterity” is itself a divided category, with neither a terminal point at which the story is definitively over, nor a universal consensus about what it means. And as White himself tells us, any pretense to a realistic perspective is challenged by an awareness of the tropological dimension of all narratives, which makes them inevitably one-sided and partial, thus opening the door for irony. Emplotting history as a tragedy from the point of view of those who are the losers can conflict with a comic emplotment of the same story, written from the perspective of the victors. The result is that one ironically undercut the other, and neither can claim the position of the truth-knowing Socratic wise man or the sovereign author of a fiction, who has the certain knowledge by

which to trump the incomplete or erroneous understanding of the actor. Adding to the potential for still more ironic uncertainty is the possibility that the audience may know more than the historian insofar as the latter is never at the end point of the interpretive process. A bit like the untrustworthy narrator device employed by some novelists, the historian can only appear to occupy the place of the “one who knows” in Socratic irony, while in fact being only a moment in the unending process of competing, often conflicting, readings of the story.

In this more radical variant of irony, which is sometimes called “paradoxical” or “unstable,” the presupposition of a realistic position of superior post-facto truth is itself called into question. Ever since such romantics as the Schlegel brothers in Germany lost confidence in the possibility of direct access to the reality of the world, irony expressed the ways in which the inevitable ambiguities of language prevented any simple distinction between appearance and reality or truth and falsehood. Although paradoxical irony could give the subject a sense of freedom, elevated as he was above all determinations, it also could imply cognitive confusion and ethical indifference. White notes the result when he says irony “provides a linguistic paradigm of a mode of thought which is radically self-critical with respect not only to a given characterization of the world of experience but also to the very effort to capture adequately the truth of things in language.”

In the hands of later masters of paradoxical irony such as Kierkegaard and Heine, the ground is forcefully undercut from any meaningful distinction between what is the case and what merely seems to be. Positivity never emerges from the abyssal structure of infinite negativity, although irrational commitment might be construed as an antidote to ironic indifference or cynical detachment.

Not surprisingly, devotees of linguistic undecidability, infinitely deferred meaning, and the limits of conceptual reasoning, such as contemporary deconstructionists, find paradoxical irony congenial to their way of thinking. For Paul de Man, for example, irony is related to the rhetorical tropes of parabasis and anacoluthon in which narratives are always interrupted and syntax remains irreparably fractured. “Irony,” he writes, “is the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes.” As a result, it is questionable for historians to seek to overcome irony, for it is “very difficult to conceive of a historiography, a system of history,

24. Romantic irony was most clearly developed in Friedrich Schlegel’s Über die Unverständllichkeit of 1800 and elucidated in such works as K. W. F. Solger’s Erwin of 1815. Often, to be sure, ironic skepticism went along with a residual utopian hope expressed in allegorical terms. For a discussion of these ambiguities, see Marshall Brown, The Shape of German Romanticism (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 90-105.

25. White, Metahistory, 37.

26. See, for example, Paul de Man, “The Concept of Irony,” in Aesthetic Ideology, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), and Kevin Newmark, Irony on Occasion: From Schlegel and Kierkegaard to Derrida and de Man (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012). Other students of Romantic irony, in particular the version defended by Friedrich Schlegel, have read its implications in less negative terms. See, for example, Gerald N. Izenberg, Impossible Individuality: Romanticism, Revolution, and the Origins of Modern Selfhood, 1787–1802 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 55-67. He identifies passages in Schlegel’s work that contradict his identification of irony with the defeat of meaning, for example, “true irony requires that there be not simply striving after infinity but also possession of infinity” (cited from his Notebooks on p. 58).

that would be sheltered from irony.”  

In fact, rather than wanting to overcome it or even write the story of its rise and fall, historians should recognize that irony is the very source of history itself. De Man’s disciple Kevin Newmark goes so far as to say that “there can be no history of irony, because irony is the condition of possibility for history. . . . Irony, on occasion and by accident, is historical because it interrupts the reign of a formal causality that would otherwise be machinelike in its imperviousness to anything other than its own predetermined and crushing movement.”

Similarly, Richard Rorty found what he called a “liberal ironist” position conducive to the embrace of contingency and suspicion of final vocabularies in which words mean only one thing. Instead, irony was inherently “nominalist and historicist.” Rorty’s historicism, as Frank Ankersmit has noted, gravitated more to the ironist than metaphorical moment in that tradition: “his outlook is closer to Burckhardt than to Ranke, so to speak. It would probably be more correct to say that both metaphor and irony have their job to perform in his thought but that he happens to subscribe to a theory of metaphor that robs it of its capacity to assert its rights against irony.”

For those, however, who hope for a way beyond such a transcendental assertion of ironic undecidability, the implications of the more radical version of paradoxical irony are problematic, leading at least potentially to quietism, nihilism, and moral indifference. For all his provocative resistance to more traditional ways of writing history, White reveals himself to be profoundly uneasy with the domination of irony, especially in its more radical guise, over the other tropic emplotments he outlines. In his discussion of Jacob Burckhardt, whose historical realism he argues was written in a satiric mode, he notes with some dismay that the great Swiss historian’s “ironic vision” led him to flee from acting in the world. In general, White observes, evidences of the crystallization of an Ironic language are the rise of skepticism in philosophy, of the sophistic in public speaking, and of the kind of argument that Plato called “eristic” in political discourse. Underlying this mode of speech is a recognition of the fractured nature of social being, of the duplicity and self-serving of politicians, of an egotism which governs all professions of interest in the common good, of naked power (kratos) ruling

28. Ibid., 184.
29. Newmark, Irony on Occasion, 11.
31. F. R. Ankersmit, Sublime Historical Experience (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 42. The theory of metaphor that Ankersmit argues Rorty adopts is derived from Donald Davidson, which he describes as a “catastrophic” use of language involving “an intervention into language from above or from outside effecting a small rupture in the normal use of language that may, at least for a certain part of language, announce a new dispensation” (37). It is not hard to see parallels with de Man’s stress on the importance of parabasis and anacoluthon.
32. Two critics of romantic irony were Mikhail Bakhtin and Henri Lefebvre, who, to be sure, at certain times in their careers found virtues in a more Socratic alternative, which gets beyond subjective self-indulgence and functions to expose ideological delusion. See the discussion in Michael E. Gardiner, “Post-Romantic Irony in Bakhtin and Lefebvre,” History of the Human Sciences 25, no. 3 (2012), 51-69.
where law and morality (ethos) are being invoked to justify actions. Ironic language, as Hegel remarked later, is an expression of the “unhappy consciousness.”

White’s discomfort with the nihilistic implications he saw in the more paradoxical variant of irony is palpable in his 1976 screed against poststructuralist criticism, “The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory.” Here he specifically attacks what he calls Derrida’s “favored trope . . . catachresis, the ironic trope par excellence. In his view, it is against the absurd imposition of meaning upon meaninglessness that all of the other tropes (metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche) arise. And it is against the absurd impulse to endow the meaningless with meaning that Derrida’s own antiphilosophizing takes shape.” Absurdism is, however, only the extreme outcome of what was called the “crisis of historicism” in the late nineteenth century, which White argues “plunged European historical thinking into the Ironic condition of mind” that “has continued to flourish as the dominant mode of professional historiography, as cultivated in the academy ever since.”

At the very end of Metahistory, White ruefully acknowledges that his own formalist, antirealist analysis of the tropological prefiguration of historical narratives itself expresses the same ironic distancing from any naïve claims to truth-telling about the past. With a certain desperation, he claims that once we acknowledge that irony is itself a function of tropological imposition on a past that lacks any inherent narrative shape, we are free to impose others at will. “If it can be shown,” he writes, “that Irony is only one of a number of possible perspectives on history, each of which has its own good reasons for existence on a poetic and moral level of awareness, the Ironic attitude will have begun to be deprived of its status as the necessary perspective from which to view the historical process.”

In the introduction to Tropics of Discourse, he would advocate the same remedy: “Kant’s distinctions among the emotions, the will and the reason are not very popular in this age, an age which has lost its belief in the will and represses its sense of the moral implications of the mode of rationality that it favors. But the moral implications of the human sciences will never be perceived until the faculty of the will is reinstated in theory.”

White’s voluntarist solution—which allowed critics like Carlo Ginzburg to charge that he was channeling the extreme subjectivism of Giovanni Gentile, the fascist philosopher, via his early interest in Bendetto Croce and Carlo Antoni—did not really lay to rest the nihilistic threat of paradoxical irony, as

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33. White, Metahistory, 231.
34. White, Tropics of Discourse, 281. Italics in original. In “The Concept of Irony,” de Man explicitly invokes catachresis, “the ability of language catachretically to name anything, by false usage, but to name and thus to posit anything language is willing to posit” (173).
35. White, Metahistory, xii.
36. Ibid, 434.
commentators were quick to note. Merely to will an alternative, especially one that transcends the “sentimental,” disillusioning reflexivity of irony and restores the robust “naïveté” of the other tropic emplotments, seemed highly dubious, a bit like consciously trying to will belief ex nihilo rather than simply being a pre-reflective believer. As Ewa Domanska has pointed out, the crisis of historicism that led to the hegemony of the ironic attitude was itself a reflection of the decline of the sacred in modern European life, and its solution shares in the general difficulty of restoring faith to its previous cohesive status. Negating negations—or in this case, ironizing irony—can produce a positive outcome only if you adopt a Hegelian comic narrative, which no one can plausibly derive from the hopelessly checkered historical record that has been left for us to interpret. Radical ironists from Kierkegaard to de Man have a case in refusing to fold it into a more capacious dialectical sublation of negation, even if the former scorned the Romantic lack of commitment.

But perhaps rather than trying to overcome irony entirely through an act of sheer will or dialectical Aufhebung, it might be better to entertain an alternative within the contested field of irony itself. As we have already noted, Socratic and dramatic irony are less threatening to historical narrative than the paradoxical or unstable variants that undermine any basis for judgment about which narratives are more plausible than others. Although White sometimes conflates the two indiscriminately, he implicitly invokes the distinction in several ways as a more effective solution to the menace of nihilistic relativism than his evocation of will. When he distinguishes between post-facto tropological emplotments and the manifold of past events, occurrences, actions, and so on that will be emplotted, he is tacitly drawing on a distinction that Kant would have appreciated between phenomenal appearances and noumenal essences, or at least between the past as it was and as it is later represented. Although like Kant, he denies the possibility of ever accessing the former without the mediation of the latter, he resists the implication that it is appearance all the way down. He also mobilizes at least the rhetoric of truth that can be misrepresented (rather than just variously represented) when he argues that naïve realism based on positivist notions of scientific objectivity is false, and tropic emplotment of narratives is what in truth historians qua metahistorians really do. His own vantage point is one that tacitly assumes the possibility of a transcendent formalism of rhetorical strategies that can exhaust the repertoire of possible tropological devices available to make sense of the past. And when he expresses the hope that knowledge about the contingent quality of ironic narration, what he calls the “turning of the Ironic consciousness against Irony itself,” will free us from the assumption that it is inevitable—an assumption he traces back with no hesitation to a transitional moment in late nineteenth-century European history—he is duplicating the Socratic strategy of

39. See, for example, the trenchant review of Metahistory by John S. Nelson in History and Theory 14, no. 1 (1975), 74-91.
40. Ewa Domanska, “Hayden White: Beyond Irony,” History and Theory 37, no. 2 (1998), 173-181. One might also argue that by granting the contemporary historian the sovereign power to will a particular emplotment, White was duplicating the elevation of the subjective consciousness in Romantic Irony over the undetermined reality facing him.
41. White, Metahistory, xii.
using irony to bring about enlightenment, even if he expresses it in an untenable dialectical form.

The value of this approach is apparent only if we return now to Quentin Skinner’s thoughts on recovering intentionality. The question of irony comes up, to be sure, only infrequently in Skinner’s own work, and then largely in terms of the issue of interpreting the intentions of past actors whose speech acts may have been delivered ironically. As in the case of speech acts in general, Skinner contends that it is not an issue of the meaning of the words used, but rather of their illocutionary intent, what their authors were hoping to do through their utterances. Skinner maintains a certain optimism about the possibility of recovering the illocutionary force even of speech acts that were ironically delivered, and so doesn’t seem fazed by the objection that surface meanings may hide deeper ones. Skinner did not devote as much attention to the issue of the prevalence of irony in the narrations of contemporary historians as did White. But he once did tell an interviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* that writing a history of liberalism demonstrating the ways in which it steadily led to the decline of political participation would "embody the kind of irony that the greatest historians have always particularly relished. For it is surely ironic that the development of the Western democracies should have been accompanied by the atrophying of the ideal that the government of the people should be conducted by the people."

Skinner’s own passing thoughts on the role of irony in historical writing are less important for our argument, however, than his stress on the importance of recovering intentionality as the principal task of the historian. As any student of recent philosophical debates can well attest, there is no dearth of controversy over the issue of intention, with phenomenologists, speech-act theorists, deconstructionists, and others struggling to arrive at a persuasive theory of its meaning and function in linguistic, ethical, and social terms. As the notorious “debate” between Derrida and John Searle in the 1970s demonstrated, the arguments often generated more heat than light. Skinner himself was at pains to align himself with those who resisted deconstruction’s claim that it was impossible to know the intentions of others with any certitude:

If we insist, as Derrida does, on such an equation between establishing that something is the case and being able to demonstrate it ‘for sure,’ then admittedly it follows that we can never hope to establish the intentions with which a text may have been written. But equally it follows that we can never hope to establish that life is not a dream. . . . [T]he skeptic is insisting on far too stringent an account of what it means to have reasons for our beliefs."

Although this charge may be a tendentious interpretation of deconstruction—Derrida explicitly stressed, after all, that “the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance”—it serves to remind us of the value of at least trying to establish intentions as best we can.

It is, in fact, only if we can do so with at least some degree of confidence that the more moderate variant of irony, which doesn’t descend into the paradoxes of infinite, destabilizing ironization, might be viable. That is, without the distinction between what actors thought they were doing, or at least what the illocutionary target of their speech acts were, we cannot assume a position of superior wisdom after the fact. To understand unintended consequences makes sense only if we can identify what the original intentions were. Although our own perspective is never definitive—there is always a chance it will itself be ironized by future narrators of more extended stories with different outcomes—we can at least benefit from the passage of time, which gives us a knowledge that is denied the actors themselves. In fact, it is only that passage that affords us whatever modicum of superior knowledge we might claim over those actors, who, after all, more directly experienced what we can only imperfectly recreate.46

What makes Skinner’s understanding of intentionality particularly insightful is precisely his sensitivity to what the champions of paradoxical irony praise for undermining any intentionality that claims to be pure and self-sufficient, an intentionality that purports to locate meaning totally within the consciousness of the intending subject. That is, Skinner’s stress on the matrix of necessary conventions in which acts take place allows us to get beyond the idea, as he puts it, that “every agent has a privileged access to his own intentions, as a way of ‘closing the context’ on the historical meaning of a text.”47 As such, it comes very close to the deconstructionist emphasis on “iterability” as a necessary element of everything that seems unique and self-sufficient, a recognition that no speech act can be isolated from the possibility of it being a repeat of what preceded it and a foreshadowing of what follows. However singular and unique it may seem, every speech act achieves what meaning it may have only in the context of the conventions that allow it to be understandable by others.

The difference between Skinner’s version of intentionality and the moderate kind of irony that it makes possible and the weaker notion of intentionality of the paradoxical ironists is, however, substantial. For whereas he sees the context as largely enabling the possible understanding of what is intended, both at the moment of initial enunciation and for later historical retrieval, the paradoxical ironists are attuned more to its disabling effects, undermining both communication at the time and accurate re-presentation later. It seems to me impossible to offer a knockdown argument on either side of the debate. That is, we certainly have many examples of the ambivalent meaning of language and obstacles to successful communication, which are only exacerbated with the passage of time. Whether or not you decry as a myth the metaphysics of presence that allegedly informs traditional philosophy, it certainly can never be found in historical inquiry, which can only register the inevitability of temporal absence and spatial dis-

46. Whether or not the immediate “experience” of actors or witnesses in history is itself the sufficient target for conceptualizing what historians try to recreate is itself a vexed question. I have tried to address it in Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), chapter 6.

47. Skinner, “Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action,” in Tully, ed., Meaning and Context, 103. He is here characterizing a position that he once erroneously held, but has since discarded.
placement. The time of historians is always “out of joint,” more “hauntological” than ontological, as Derrida would put it. And so, no perfect re-experiencing of original intended meaning—or the context of conventions in which speech acts tried to do something through words—is ever possible. Nor indeed, if it were, would it be a sufficient explanation for subsequent historical developments, which involve the clash of intentions producing consequences no one desires.

But whether this means we are doomed to the disabling paradoxical irony that so distressed White, or can adopt with some degree of confidence a more Socratic or dramatic irony in which appearance and reality can be meaningfully distinguished, is a different question. Certainly, practicing historians would be loath to abandon at least some privileged sense of knowing outcomes, even granting that some are still provisional, better than the actors in media res. Hindsight, we might say, provides the historian’s equivalent of the Socratic or dramatic ironist’s superior epistemological position of knowing what the actors did not know. In fact, it is precisely because of the ironic attitude in the more modest dramatic sense that we can honor Skinner’s injunction to try to situate speech acts in their original illocutionary contexts and yet register the ways in which later periods may have transformed, distorted, or even betrayed those intentions.

Yes, John Locke may not have intended to be the father of a tradition that came to be called liberalism, and it would be anachronistic to pin that label on him, as if he were a self-conscious founding father. But if we take seriously the frequent role of unintended consequences in history, then it makes sense to understand that outcome in an ironic manner. And likewise, we can find in the seemingly very different methodological projects of Hayden White and Quentin Skinner a complementarity

48. Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International, transl. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994). One might also note that many synchronic analyses of the workings of society draw on the ironic implications of unintended consequences, whether for good or ill. Thus, for example, ever since Bernard de Mandeville’s Fable of the Bees, the idea that private vices can lead to public virtues has justified unregulated market behavior. Ethical theodicies of one sort or another also find a way to turn partial evil into a more general good.

In short, the road to heaven can be paved with bad intentions.

49. In intellectual history, to stay with Skinner’s main area of interest, the dissolution of a single authorial intention, expressed in his or her textual record, into the maelstrom of different intentions that make up a tradition inevitably involves unintended consequences. This is true not only when the proper name is subsumed in the tradition—say, Locke and liberalism or Machiavelli and republicanism—but even when it is retained, as for example in Marxism or Freudianism. Can, after all, the history of Christianity be written without ironic reference to the unrealized intentions of its founding figure?

50. Another way to make this point would be to adopt the distinction made by Jürgen Habermas between “social integration,” based on communicative interaction, and “system integration,” based on impersonal steering mechanisms like money and bureaucratic rationality. As Seyla Benhabib has noted, “whereas system integration can occur even when there is a discrepancy between intention and consequence, social integration cannot take place unless action consequences are compatible with the intentions of social actors. It follows that whereas action systems can be analyzed, and in fact can only be grasped from the external perspective of the third, of the observer, social integration must be analyzed from the internal perspective of those involved. . . . [I]n the one case, the consequences of social action proceed ‘behind the back of individuals’; in the later case the occurrence of social action needs to be explained via a reconstruction of its meaning as grasped by social actors.” Seyla Benhabib, Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 231. If we assume that historical reconstruction normally entails a dynamic balance between these two perspectives, the necessity of some irony based on unintended consequences is inescapable, but so too is the possibility of outcomes deliberately intended by actors.
that neither would have intended and might still, if pressed, deny. Authors, after all, are not always the best judges of the historical meaning of their own ideas.

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ADDENDA

I sent a draft of this essay to the two protagonists, who very generously responded with comments that clarify and amplify their positions. Although composed in an ad hoc and informal way, which make them more suggestive than definitive, each contributes to the further consideration of points raised in the essay. With their permission, I append them here, shorn of the gracious pleasantries that framed them. But I will not refrain from expressing my own gratitude in return not only for their supportive response to the piece, but also for the many years I have been reading their work with pleasure and profit.

From Hayden White, November 5, 2012:

about intentions and intentionality, the relation between an intention and an action is quite clear and easily recognizable in an Aristotelian world in which the agent is presumed to have a discernible character and actions stem from conscious decisions and choices rather than from some combination of conscious and unconscious motives. In other words, the presumed relation between intentions and actions in which actions are implementations of intentions sits uneasily with the psychoanalytical notion of actions as results of unconscious as well as conscious motives or motivations. In “Die Triebe und seine Schicksale,” Freud deals with drives as having a greater or lesser intensity, an aim (a purpose, a goal which is to relieve the tension caused by the lack of an object to possess), and an object (the thing which, once possessed, has the effect of releasing the tension—momentarily). The point is that the drive is purely physical and even organ-specific (oral, anal, genital) and lacking in consciousness (except as consciousness of desire or want) and emerges to consciousness as want in need of an object for satisfaction. It is this consciousness of need which leads to the undertaking of a search for an object, the need for possession of which puts the drive under the power of the reality-principle.

But of course you know all this. My point would be that the search for the desire that motivates activity in a field like political thought or theory or philosophy would be quite different from the search for intention. For the intention to satisfy a desire would be quite different from the intention to carry out some practical action, such as building a bridge or designing an energy-efficient automobile. The problem, for me, with any attempt to liken a political theory, such as Aristotle’s or Machiavelli’s or Locke’s, to the designing of a bridge is that the laws or principles of bridge-building are known in the ways that the principles that make for a good society are not. A good bridge is one that does the job of conveying travelers across an expanse safely. What constitutes a good society or polity is determined by what is meant by “good,” understood not as a function of any given person or persons’ intentions but in some intensional (not intentional) sense. It is precisely what you indicate when you point out that meaning really has to do with noumenality (rather than phenomenality alone).

Now, I do not know about Skinner, but as far as I am concerned, modernity is definable specifically by a loss of belief in the very idea of a noumenal ground for anything. Which is to say, loss of a belief in metaphysical substance. And the same goes for the concept of character which underlay and authorized the idea of a logical connection between a consciously conceived intention, on the one side, and an action, on the other. The concept of intention favored by Skinner might be similar to that which is still alive in law and jurisprudence, where intention as well as occasion and means must be proven in order to
make a person guilty of a crime. But here “intention” is understood in a commonsensical way and in a way that makes it possible to distinguish between crimes of passion and calculated crimes. From a psychoanalytical standpoint, the very idea of “crime” is relative to the legal system under whose jurisdiction the crime in question falls. In conscious thought and especially consciously theoretical thought, intention is a good index of meaning. But the idea that intention and meaning are related in a logical or causal way is deceptive. That is to say, the location of the relation between intention and meaning (of an action, of a discourse, or a speech act, etc.) within consciousness alone cannot account for the “contradictions” in a discourse which any author, however brilliant, profound, or learned, never seems to feel to be such, but which his or her critic knows to be such. And here is where the ironic consciousness of the critic kicks in. He finds a contradiction (logical or performative) and then, if he is sympathetic to his author, tries to correct or, if he is unsympathetic, treats as invalidating of the whole discourse. Or if he is really ironic, the critic will sort out “dialectically” and show how the two horns of the contradiction are simply an inversion or chiasmus of some kind that really fuels the discourse and gives it is peculiar or original “character.” Historians of political thought are good at this, i.e., not in pretending to know better about the political than Plato or Machiavelli or whomever, but in pretending to be able to read their authors better than their authors could read themselves. For us post-Freudians, the contradiction, like any form of parapraxis, is the place where the unconscious intention of the author (or the text) begins to show itself. Hegel’s brilliance was to show that contradiction is where the logical and psychological become indistinguishable, to the advantage of neither. It is like the “sive” in Spinoza’s Deus sive natura, where the “or” does not signal mutual exclusion (either this or that but not both) but inclusiveness and extensionality (this but also that).

From Quentin Skinner, November 12, 2012:

While White’s and my paths are divergent—and duly diverge in your article—it was fascinating to find that I agreed with everything you say about me on p. [33], in spite of the fact that this turned out to align me so closely with White. As you say, he and I have never really interacted—although I remember a very enjoyable conference about his work at Wesleyan in the 1970s, which I attended with Dick Rorty. It’s true too that I have never professionally engaged with the topic of irony (except as a prominent trope in Hobbes’s philosophy, as I tried to point out in chapter 10 of my 1996 book). I confess too that I have tended to find White’s defiant formalism, as you nicely call it, methodologically too far from my own prejudices to be able to profit from it. His hero is obviously Vico, whereas mine is Wittgenstein.

It’s true, however, that we share a strong interest in rhetoric, although here too we diverge, and it occurred to me that it might even be worth adding a word about why this is so. For White, as for Derrida, the art of rhetoric is essentially regarded as a series of elocutionary devices—to put it in classic terms, they emphasize “elocution.” For me, by contrast, rhetoric is the name of a theory of argument—to put it in classical terms again, I emphasise “inventio” and “dispositio,” and their alleged roles in maximizing the persuasive force of utterances. It was Hobbes’s all-out attack in “The Elements of Law” on the theory of invention, and especially on the idea that we can fitly reason from so-called commonplaces, that originally drew me to his interest in the subject.

It seems to me that irony settles down into being the main topic of your article, although we return very elegantly to intentionality in relation to ironic utterance at the end. I’m afraid that professionally I have never engaged with Socratic irony, but I have been much impressed by Jonathan Lear’s recent book on Kierkegaard’s understanding of irony as a matter of failing to grasp the true meaning of our practices. Addressing a Christian community, K. asks: are there any Christians? You can profess the religion and hold the relevant beliefs while still failing to “get” what it means to be a Christian, and there’s the ironic gap. I wondered if it might be worth saying a word about this view of the concept?
Clearly it’s very close to the kind of dramatic irony you discuss, but it’s not quite the same. By the way, although you cite *Othello*, it has always seemed to me that the most ironic play in the canon is *Macbeth*: everything turns out exactly as predicted, and nevertheless turns out entirely unpredictably. It seems to me very interesting—as you valuably stress—that once we get to these kinds of depths, White turns out to be very uneasy about the concept after all.

The reason I don’t myself have anything interesting to say about irony is that for me it’s basically a hidden code in relation to what is meant by what is said. My suggestion is that, although the ironist is someone who means something other than is said, with luck and contextualization you can nevertheless hope to uncover what was meant.