

A Whitean Reading of Richard Stallman: Literary Dimensions in “The GNU Operating System and the Free Software Movement”

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I renounce my present life, my present and concrete existence in order to make myself known in the ideality of truth and value. A wellknown schema. The battle by which I wish to raise myself above my life even while I retain it, in order to enjoy recognition, is in this case within myself, and writing is indeed the phenomenon of this battle.

Jacques Derrida

The character and tone of American culture have undergone significant revisions as a result of major advancements in information technology that have occurred over the past half century. The popular texts about these technologies promote a utopian vision of their limitless potential by drawing on long-standing literary conventions.

When viewed through the lens of narrative theory, seminal historical accounts of the computer technology, such as those written by “Tracy Kidder, Stephen Levy, David Kushner, and Tom Wolfe” are reported to bring about fruitful outcomes (Sartain, 2009). It is also applicable to the writings on the hacker culture and the free software movement. Sam Williams's journalistic practices and Richard Stallman's personal historical accounts can be read and studied from a narratological perspective. Reading well-known nonfiction accounts of history on the development of the free software movement exemplifies the fact that the movement's discourse is still developing and appears to be interesting to investigate.

Using Hayden White's premise on historical writing and narrative prose discourse as a basis for discussion, the present paper analyzes how Richard Stallman (1999) employs literary forms in his text “The GNU Operating System and the Free Software Movement” to present a picture of himself and his contributions to the free software movement in a way that is accessible to a wide audience. By doing so, the paper also attempts to draw attention to the fact that reading histories in a manner that is fully attentive and responsive to the poetics of historical representation enables us to gain insights by comprehending how plot shapes content.

Background

History and literature have a common background that has waned since the late 18th century. Before that time, people generally accepted historical accounts as legitimate works of fiction because they followed a similar organizational structure and presentational style as classical rhetoric (White, 1973; Ricouer, 1984; La Capra, 1985). As White (1978a) indicates, a formal analysis of a historical narrative reveals that it is not only a reproduction of the events it describes but also a complex of symbols that directs us to “an icon of the structure of those events in literary tradition” (p. 88).

Instead of compiling a scientific survey of events deduced from pieces of evidence, a historian is constrained by his or her own experience and opinion concerning the actual events being studied. According to Stanford (1986), a historian approaches the historical task “to effect a creative fusion between his or her mind and the evidence” (p. 97).

Historiography is inextricably intertwined with linguistic structures, profoundly affecting and complicating its logical operations. In recent decades, the linguistic turn among cultural historians has taken a more self-reflective turn about the nature of history as a narrative or history as a story. The linguistic turn has compelled us to reconsider what kind of act historical writing is (Deetz, 2003). Historians, as we can see from Hayden White and other theorists who have expanded his theory, namely, Hans Kellner, Louise O. Mink, Louise Montrose, Stephen Bann, and Lionel Gossman, are storytellers.

White's premise is that historical writing is fundamentally a form of narrative prose discourse. By saying that histories have an irreducible literary or textual dimension, White does not deny the reality of the past. Instead, he accentuates the fact that before historians can portray, illustrate, or review historical data, they must first imagine the field as a mental object (White, 1978a). Evidence from geography, documents, laws, records, journals, and secondary authorities is all taken into account by modern narrative historians as they draw their conclusions. A narrator cannot describe the 'real' without also providing some insight into their internal emotional state.

Moreover, White's approach was developed into a creative point. In his essay "Fictions of Factual Representation", White makes a correlation between the goal of the author of a novel and the goal of the author of a history, declaring that they each want to form a linguistic representation of the concept of "reality" (1978b: p. 122). This formulates the idea that historical narratives are subject to the same constraints and rules of language and rhetoric as other forms of literature. Therefore, methods of rhetorical analysis that were previously applied primarily to literary texts are considered necessary to analyze historical texts. White argued throughout his entire body of work that historical writings are eligible for and should be analyzed for the craft of their composition, the rhetorical demands of their plot structures and arguments, and the rhetorical instruments they claim to employ in order to represent historical truth or reality.

In the same fashion, every account of historical events, whether written or oral, relies on figurative depictions of the happenings that it seeks to represent and explain. And since this is the case, it follows that historical narratives, when viewed solely as "verbal artifacts", can be classified according to the "mode of figurative discourse" in which they are presented (White, 1978a, p. 94). White's method can be applicable for all accounts that contextualize, interpret, and depict historical events and figures.

Sol Cohen's (1999) work analyzing the various forms of histories of twentieth-century American education provides a prime illustration of this phenomenon. It is possible to make these interpretations based on the historiography's structure, rhetoric, implications of the author, and the vantage point of the narrator. That is to say, historical accounts can take many forms, including diaries, history books, and epics. The purpose of each one of them is to give the reader some background information on the scene that was chosen from the past and place it in the context of the events that were illustrated.

Emplotment of *The GNU Operating System and the Free Software Movement* as A Romance

White proposes a methodical investigation of the literal aspects of historiographical writing as a means of illuminating the conceptual nuances of historical consciousness embedded in the text's fundamental structure (Cohen, 1999; White, 1978a). At this juncture, in the tradition of literary critic Northrop Frye, White separates the historian's initial literary resources into the four genres, "romance, comedy, satire, and tragedy", all of which can be

combined within certain characteristics (1978a, p. 85). Along with that, he presents a general correlation between these four prefigurative modes or emplotments and the four main modes of ideological implication: “anarchist, conservative, radical, and liberal” (1978a: 86). Further, he suggests that historical accounts should never be interpreted literally but rather as complex metaphors that “liken” the events they describe to ones from our own literary canon (1978a, p. 91). From a Whitenean stance, the mythopoetic titles of histories on the hacker culture, for instance, “The Revenge of the Hackers” by Eric S. Raymond (1999), *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* by Stephen Levy (1984), and “2001: A Hacker’s Odyssey” by Sam Williams (2002) reveal the full extent of their plotting.

As White demonstrates, the author's drive is the key to understanding the purpose of historiography (1978b). Thus, it is important to recognize the persuasive function that histories play in shaping the thoughts, emotions, and values of their readers. In his Whitenean reading of the histories of the education system, Cohen (1999) emphasizes that the paratext and all of its constituent elements, such as the title, prologue, dedication, acknowledgments, footnotes, references, bibliography, and appendices, are rhetorical devices or strategies (p. 78). Such paratextual elements can also contribute to the meaning-making process of the reader: Stallman also employs them. Originally published in *Open Sources: Voices from the Open Source Revolution* (DiBona, C., & Ockman, S., 1999), — “The GNU Operating System and the Free Software Movement¹”, with its 29 subsections such as “A Stark Moral Choice”, “The Collapse of the Community”, “Challenges in Our Future”, “We Must Talk About Freedom”, and “Try”, employs a romantic emplotment style and an episodic progressive ideological implication.

More specifically, though, similar to literary conventions, the historian's emplotment strategy significantly influences the work's overall coherence. The plot of a history is what turns the chronological order of events into a narrative that can be understood by the reader (White, 1978a). In this way, prefigurative modes² liberate the *expressive energies of languages*³ and provide a set of plot elements that are believed to shape the meaning-making process of the reader. In this linguistic endeavour, historians need to employ the same “tropological strategies”, or ways of expressing relationships through language, as poets and novelists (White, 1978a, p. 125).

The remainder of this paper will demonstrate the parallels between the elements of romance and Stallman's selected text. I will mainly concentrate on the identification and representation of the following concepts: *and then narrative*, *wish-fulfillment formula*, *idyllic world*, *demonic or night world*, *hero*, *epiphany*, *forza* and *froda* (Frye, 1976).

Frye⁴ (1976) defines *romance* as “and then” narratives. Hence, romance is typically “sensational”, that is, it moves from one discontinuous episode to the next, primarily describing events that occur to characters (p. 34). Stallman (1999) employs episodic progress in his text by selecting facts and events, and arranging them into a narrative plot structure to portray his quest for the free software movement.

¹ Writing the present text for an editorial book which was dedicated to open source movement, Stallman seems to seize the opportunity and does not hesitate to stray from the spirit of collaboration to remind his contributions and outweigh the ideologies of free software movement over Open Sources. Readers are implicitly told the story of Open Sources while reading the history of the free software movement. In “We Must Talk About Freedom”, “Open Sources” and “Try” sections, this becomes more explicit.

² I refer to the plot structures of satire, comic, tragedy, and romance.

³ Richard Sheppard (1890) frequently uses this phrase in *The Crisis of Language*.

⁴ Although Frye's presented an in-depth analysis of the romance in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1956), he offered a more comprehensive analysis in *The Secular Scripture*. I will refer both of them, as the former had provided a baseline for the latter.

Stallman (1999) begins his historical account with one of the most artless story introductions, a natural flow formula: “When I...” (p. 31). Opening in medias-res, his text describes the past as a time of sharing, freedom, and harmony. He notes, “Sharing of software was not limited to our particular community; it is as old as computers, just as sharing of recipes is as old as cooking” (p. 31). This can be read as the *wish-fulfillment formula* of the romance genre, which is characterized “by its extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space” (Frye, n.d, 1956, 2020, in press). The narrator's dissatisfaction with the present is triggered by thinking about the past, but this also provides an opportunity to elaborate on the various circumstances. Throughout Stallman's text, the wish-fulfillment formula becomes more visible in tone and pertinent in narrative:

We did not call our software “free software,” because that term did not yet exist; but that is what it was. Whenever people from another university or a company wanted to port and use a program, we gladly let them. If you saw someone using an unfamiliar and interesting program, you could always ask to see the source code [...] so that you could read it, change it, or cannibalize parts of it to make a new program. (p. 31)

As can be deduced from the quotation that once there was a world associated with sharing, freedom, cooperation, and creativity. This may be taken as an element of romance which Frye defines as *the idyllic world*⁵. In Stallman's text, romance genre is replete with allusions to the idyllic world order and its re-establishment as a result of the events that center the protagonist's struggle for existence. The existence of the idyllic world is essential for the evolution of contrasting personalities, events, and phenomena. By using the wish-fulfillment formula, Stallman is able to construct an idyllic world and lay the groundwork for the representation and presentation of the facts he finds most intriguing. From this point forward, Stallman develops a conceptual model, which the events are compared to in order to encode them as components of a structure that can be recognized.

As the genre of romance requires the inclusion of contrasting elements, such as *good versus evil* or *virtue versus vice*, we are typically carried directly from one world to the next. The paradox of an *idyllic world* invites the presence of *the demonic or night world*, where Stallman tackles with ideological oppositions, and eventually with the downsides of isolation for the sake of liberation. Stallman fantasies an idyllic world instead of a demonic or night world which is here the proprietary software industry. This polarization is also identifiable in Stallman's vocabulary. In several lines, he refers to the proprietary software industry or its restrictive socioeconomic measures as “evil” or “enemy”.

In romance, it is typically the individual, the hero or heroine, who has the vision of liberation, while the society they are a part of wishes to remain in a vast and blinding darkness (Frye, 1976, p. 92). In “A Stark of Moral Choice”, Stallman (2009) elaborates on his vision and literally liberates himself from the constraints of the proprietary software industry:

⁵ Frye (1976) defines the idyllic world as a place that is associated with joy, safety, and tranquility; the focus is frequently placed on childhood or on a “innocent” or pre-genital period of youth, and the images are those of spring and summer.

The easy choice was to join the proprietary software world, signing nondisclosure agreements and promising not to help my fellow hacker. Most likely I would also be developing software that was released under nondisclosure agreements, thus adding to the pressure on other people to betray their fellows too. I could have made money this way, and perhaps amused myself writing code. But I knew that at the end of my career, I would look back on years of building walls to divide people, and feel I had spent my life making the world a worse place. (p. 32)

And in fact, there are, in the romance, heroic figures. The primary reason for the existence of heroes and villains is to represent the contrast between the idyllic and demonic world. Needless to say, the protagonist of the present romance is the Stallman. In the spirit of a true hero, he prioritizes the well-being of others over his own, despite the fact that he is aware of the drawbacks of his decision and the potential complications in the near or distant future.

The romantic thought of romance when combined with its episodic representation, provides a space for subjectivity where Stallman can make claims to illustrate truths and take upon values to which nothing but his vision gives access. In a sense, White (1978a) asserts unequivocally that historical events serve as raw narrative elements. These elements, such as literature, are transformed into imaginative explanations based on the author's perspective. The historian provides characters, establishes themes and concepts, and implements differences in attitude, thereby supplying information that becomes literature. Although it seems to be a factual historical account of the free software movement and to be considered nonfiction writing, we, as readers, should take into account that it represents a subjective stand and transmits a personal experience based on the explanations of the author, Stallman.

The tensions that are embodied in the narrative of Stallman share an ontology and ideology that serve to give life to long-standing cultural myths by treating visions as realities while simultaneously capturing the widespread acceptance of the general public. For him, he was the chosen man. Quoting Hillel, Stallman describes how he galvanized into action in the same spirit as Hillel did, he notes, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?” (1999, p. 32). The ontological and ideological tensions also echo in “Free as in Freedom” section, Stallman adds, “As an operating system developer, I had the right skills for this job. So even though I could not take success for granted, I realized that I was elected to do the job” (1999, p. 32). Initially, Stallman’s remarks can be interpreted as the moment of subjective epiphany, in which a character comes to a life-altering realization that changes the rest of the plot.

Other concrete details from the emplotment can be seen in the structure of Stallman's writing. It would be helpful to mention two aspects of romance known as *forza* and *froda* before referring to the lines in which Stallman explicitly declares himself to be the hero, leader, or commander of the free software movement. *Forza and froda*, which translate to “violence and cunning”, are the distinguishing characteristics—indeed, the cardinal virtues—of the romantic hero or heroine (Frye, 1976: pp. 65–66). Stallman (1999) figuratively links how he used his cunning as an instrument of violence to overcome another violence:

Unix was (and is) proprietary software, and the GNU project’s philosophy said that we should not use proprietary software. But, applying the same reasoning that leads

to the conclusion that violence in self defense is justified, I concluded that it was legitimate to use a proprietary package when that was crucial for developing a free replacement that would help others stop using the proprietary package. But, even if this was a justifiable evil, it was still an evil. (p. 34)

A few pages later, the structural invocation of the “fallen city” metaphor in the final lines of his text demonstrates Stallman's unwavering reliance on literature for his framing metaphors, even in what appears to be a meditation on the future of freedom and duty. Immediately after an allusion to Yoda, Stallman (1999) defines his quest for free software with highly metaphoric expressions:

But I tried anyway, because there was no one but me between the enemy and my city. Surprising myself, I have sometimes succeeded. Sometimes I failed; some of my cities have fallen. Then I found another threatened city, and got ready for another battle. (p. 37)

On the other hand, there is simply no possible way that this narrative could ever end on an upward trajectory of defeat. As Cohen also stresses that the “happy ending” and the moral that inspires hope must come after the protagonist's defeat in any historical narrative that is told in a romantic mode of presentation (1999, p. 72). As his Adamic quest continues, Stallman becomes more distinguished by his *froda*. He brings his text to a satisfying conclusion with an epiphany⁶. He concludes:

Over time, I’ve learned to look for threats and put myself between them and my city, calling on other hackers to come and join me...

But the dangers are greater each year, and now Microsoft has explicitly targeted our community. We can’t take the future of freedom for granted. Don’t take it for granted! If you want to keep your freedom, you must be prepared to defend it. (pp. 37-38)

This is a perfect example of how Stallman invigorates figurative language and imbues his text with a secondary textual meaning distinct from its literal meaning. Like a metaphor, a historical narrative does not depict the phenomena it signifies but instead evokes mental images of those phenomena. White claims that histories are able to give sets of past events meanings beyond any comprehension they provide by appealing to “putative causal laws” by taking advantage of the figurative shared characteristics between sets of real events and the usual frameworks of our fictitious accounts (1978a, p. 91). In addition, this understanding of historical discourse permits us to see the particular narrative as an “image of the events” it describes, while the “generic story-type acts as a conceptual model” which the events are compared to in order to encode them as identifiable parts of a structure (White, 1975, p. 58). Obviously, his analogy prompts us to reflect on conceptual models. Developing on from this, Stallman, like a romantic character, does not hesitate to polish his helmet while prophetically highlighting the impending dangers.

⁶ Here I am referring to the objective epiphany which is experienced by the readers. A good discussion of epiphanies can be found in Tigges, W. (Ed.). (1999). Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany. *Rodopi. (Vol. 25).* pp.10-31

Stylistically and thematically, Stallman (1999) relies heavily on literary and cultural tropes, including metaphor, image, and generic conventions, to create an elaborate montage of the past, present, and the future. As an evidence for this, Stallman who recounts the birth of the free software movement often do so using a vocabulary that reinforces a bourgeois ideology of masculinity, reiterating long-held biases and repressions through a synthesis of formulaic elements borrowed from the western and contemporary romance genres that fuse old ideological repressions with the sheen of his philosophy. He acknowledges and proclaims his heroism as both an author and a character. His method of emplotment gives him the ability to accomplish this goal. Stallman's text in many ways paralleled by that of the romance genre. More generally, he treats his quest as an Adamic experience. If he had chosen to write his historical account in the form of a satire or a tragedy, he would have been unable to demonstrate to the world that "the character Stallman" is the man with the vision, the leader, or the commander who developed the free software movement.

Conclusion

The choice of story form or plot structure by the historian carries a certain ideological weight; it is indicative of a certain moral and political sensibility. Furthermore, historical accounts are social transformations. They are created by someone for someone involved in a pre-existing or ongoing argument, debate, or discourse. There is always an audience. The purpose of all histories is to convince readers to adopt a particular perspective regarding the past and, by extension, the present.

Instead of focusing on the content, which exists independently of and prior to its form—the assumed neutral and transparent container that transmits the content—White allows us to read meaning into histories through reference to their predominant form, mode of emplotment, and rhetorical strategies. In the context of this particular study, White's approach guides us reading new meaning into histories of the free software movement and to find more layers of meaning than it would appear to contain.

This paper argued that Stallman's works are not only accounts of the past, but also metaphorical statements that suggest a connection between these models and the story types that we typically utilize to convey culturally sanctioned meanings. If we pay attention to the way that Stallman plots his narrative, we can see that the narrative's deep structural content is an example of the romance genre.

So, approaching Stallman's writing through a Whitenean stance and declaring Stallman as a practitioner of the romance genre, it is my hope that this reading will be able to serve as a suggestion for further analysis of Stallman's ideology as an extension and alteration of the concept of "frontier man" in American Romanticism.

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