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## The Poetics of Mughal History: Discerning Abu'l-Fazl's Emplotment of The Akbarnāma

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*Peter Dziedzic*

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THE POETICS OF MUGHAL HISTORY:  
DISCERNING ABU'L-FAẒL'S EMPLOTMENT OF  
THE *AKBARNĀMA*

INTRODUCTION

The Mughal period has been appraised by scholars as one of the most prolific and creative eras of Persianate<sup>1</sup> literary and historiographical production.<sup>2</sup> Among the many works produced from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, Abu'l-FaẒl's *Akbarnāma* [The Book of Akbar] stands as an exemplary product of this epoch. As the

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term "Persianate" rather than "Indo-Muslim" or "Indo-Persian" to emphasize an expansive discourse that included not only literature written in Persian and produced within the geographical boundaries of Persia, but also languages and cultures which were heavily influenced by Persian, such as Turkish and Urdu. Similarly, the restriction of Persian writing in South Asia as "Indo-Persian" limits the scope of its place in and contribution to a wider network of intellectual exchange. This expansive network is what Shahab Ahmad has referred to as the "Balkans-to-Bengal" complex. See *What is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* by Shahab Ahmed (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Asim Roy, "Indo-Persian Historical Thoughts and Writings: India 1350-1750," in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, ed. Daniel Woolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 158.

court-sponsored “biography”<sup>3</sup> and encyclopedic chronicle of the reign of the third Mughal emperor Jalal al-Dīn Akbar, its literary style was cherished and studied by Mughals and other scholars for generations. While the *Akbarnāma* is readily acknowledged as an Indo-Persian chronicle, little critical attention has been paid to the details or contours of Abu’l-Faḡl’s historical project in the text. Empirical data – dates, places, events – is couched within Abu’l-Faḡl’s elaborate, eulogistic prose, indicative of its location as a court-sponsored text which attempted to portray Akbar as the confluence of full political and spiritual authority on earth. What are the implications of this? How can we evaluate the historical material of the *Akbarnāma*, given its rich literary style? This calls for new, and creative, historical analyses of not only the text, but Abu’l-Faḡl’s project of historical writing.

I propose a re-reading of the *Akbarnāma* with the framework developed by the contemporary historian, Hayden White. White’s project<sup>4</sup> emphasizes the narrative and literary nature of historical reflection and writing. This narrative analysis may be the most appropriate approach for re-considering the historiographical value of the *Akbarnāma*, as it echoes key intuitions of Persianate traditions of historical writing. Analyzing the *Akbarnāma* within a framework of narrative analysis allows us to consider the *Akbarnāma* as it was originally intended – not as a catalogue of empirical data, but a conscious blend of historical documentation and literary production that primarily valued the aesthetic quality of its consumption as text alongside a Mughal ideological project of Akbar’s apotheosis. This analysis will reveal new textures of the *Akbarnāma* as historical

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<sup>3</sup> The nature of the *Akbarnāma* as a biography in its conventional, contemporary sense will be problematized later in this paper.

<sup>4</sup> For readability, I name White’s project as “narrative analysis” throughout the rest of the paper. This does not exhaust White’s intellectual production. While it is reductive to limit White’s historical evaluations to mere “narrative analysis” this will necessarily restrict the scope and concern of White’s project for this particular paper.

writing and may serve as a model for other considerations of Islamic, Persianate, and South Asian historical writing.

### **SITUATING *THE AKBARNĀMA*: ABU'L-FAẒL AND THE GLORIOUS REIGN OF EMPEROR AKBAR<sup>5</sup>**

The *Akbarnāma*, at the time of its commission by Akbar (d. 1605)<sup>6</sup> in 1588, was already situated within the context of a long and rich Indo-Persian historical tradition. This literature was heavily indebted to the forms and concerns of earlier Persianate and Arabo-Islamic historiographical traditions,<sup>7</sup> having evolved from the time of the Delhi Sultanates.<sup>8</sup> The basic forms of medieval Indo-Persian historical writing - which expressed itself in the forms of genres of biography, chronicle, annals, and dynastic histories - was a direct inheritance of the classical forms of Islamic historiography.

The *Akbarnāma*, composed by Akbar's court historian Abu'l-Faẓl al-'Alimi (d. 1602)<sup>9</sup> is divided into three books. The first book presents Akbar's horoscope and lineage from Adam through Tamerlane on his father's side and Gengis Khan on his grandfather Babur's side to Akbar himself. It continues as a year-by-year chronicle of Akbar's reign from his accession in 1556 to 1572. The second book

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<sup>5</sup> As I have stated previously, much of this biographical, "factual" information is based on uncritical analyses of original sources or chronicles. This is not unproblematic, and is very much at the heart of the "crisis of historical scholarship" in South Asia. I move forward acknowledging the difficulty in accepting some of this information at face value, and I welcome further attempts to sift through this information with new historical methods. I use this information not to provide definitive details, but to offer the reader a sense of accepted conventions and ideas about Persianate historiography, Abu'l-Faẓl, and the *Akbarnāma*.

<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of readability, I will not include dates of the Islamic *hijri* calendar. All dates, while offered in the *Akbarnāma* as the Islamic calendar, will be presented in Gregorian equivalents.

<sup>7</sup> Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 66.

<sup>8</sup> Roy, "Indo-Persian Historical Thoughts and Writings: India 1350-1750," 148.

<sup>9</sup> Abu'l-Faẓl Allami, *The History of Akbar*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston. (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2017.), vii.

continues this annual chronicle from 1572 to 1602. The third book, the *‘Ain-i Akbari*, is an ambitious and extensive survey of Akbar’s India, which is now treated as a work separate from the *Akbarnāma*.<sup>10</sup> As most administrative records were lost and destroyed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the *Akbarnāma* and the *‘Ain-i Akbari* are often regarded as primary sources of historical information. It serves as essential source material for Mughal and early modern India, and it contains a wealth of information on the political and military affairs of the empire. There were several implicit goals in writing the *Akbarnāma*. First, it was to thoroughly present and detail Akbar’s reign, both diachronically and synchronically. The second aim was to present Akbar as the pinnacle of the Mughal Empire’s peace, stability, and splendor. The third aim was to define Mughal imperial ideology.<sup>11</sup>

Scholars consider Akbar’s keen interest in sponsoring biographical and historical writing as part of his larger political and social projects. He promoted new, pluralist historical narratives, which reflected a new concept of history developed by Abu’l-Faḡl. Moving away from earlier Indo-Persian chronicles, the *Akbarnāma* stresses the imperial interest of a multi-communal state.<sup>12</sup> Akbar aimed to shift the narrative of Muslims in India from one of perennial conflict with Hindus to to one of state-endorsed social harmony (*sulh-i kul*), stability, and good governance. This impetus was also informed by Akbar’s founding of the *Dīn-i Ilāhī*, a new, and short-lived, religious movement which was the result of Akbar’s interest in various religions. His court-sponsored projects are part of an effort to legitimize these eclectic interests despite a disagreeable, yet still-influential, class of religious scholars, the *‘ulema*.<sup>13</sup> These shifts were

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., vii-x.

<sup>11</sup> Dale, “Indo-Persian Historiography,” 590.

<sup>12</sup> Allami, *The History of Akbar*, vii.

<sup>13</sup> Roy, “Indo-Persian Historical Thoughts and Writings: India 1350-1750,” 160.

enhanced by Abu'l-Fazl's own innovations to writing and historical method.

Abu'l-Fazl al-'Alimi was the court historian, secretary, and close confidant of Akbar. He entered the Mughal court in 1574 thanks to the support of his elder brother, Akbar's poet-laureate Abu'l Faiz.<sup>14</sup> He is considered as a leading influence on Akbar's liberal religious and social programs. Abu'l-Fazl, who worked on the *Akbarnāma* for the majority of his courtly career, was murdered in 1602 and was never able to finish the text. The *Akbarnāma* was eventually completed by another author<sup>15</sup>, and painstaking care was taken to mirror Abu'l-Fazl's style and imitate a unity throughout the text, reflecting the great prestige which Abu'l-Fazl's writing had earned during his career.<sup>16</sup> Abu'l-Fazl, with the support and patronage of the emperor, is credited with introducing the concept of "official history" to Indo-Persian historical literature, which reflects a pivot in methodology. It has been portrayed as concerned with discerning rational causes of historical events. This new concept of history moved away from a strict focus on the court to inclusion of material beyond the political realm, including social, economic, and religio-cultural concerns.<sup>17</sup> This project was facilitated by a necessary methodological shift, which included extensive and careful consultation of a vast amount of archival material.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Allami, *The History of Akbar*, xi.

<sup>15</sup> While this is true, it does not impact this analysis, as all textual selections are extracted from the first volume of the *Akbarnāma*, which was entirely composed by Abu'l-Fazl.

<sup>16</sup> This act of authorial imitation as an act of obscuring traces of authorial difference is worth mention, as it may offer essential insights into Mughal notions of authorship and textual ownership, which may be a key difference separating Indo-Persian and modern (European) historical consciousness. Such a study is beyond the present scope of this paper.

<sup>17</sup> Roy, "Indo-Persian Historical Thoughts and Writings: India 1350-1750," 159-161.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 159-160.

While he has been praised for his innovative methodology and consultation of a wide variety of sources, one must still grapple with this work as a royally-commissioned project. There is an implicit project, in the *Akbarnāma*, to portray Akbar as a divinely-sanctioned ruler, the source and culmination of both political and spiritual authority on earth. For this, Abu'l-Fazl draws heavily from the vocabulary of both popular and philosophical Sufism, taken both from Persian poetry and from theoretical works of Islamic mysticism and philosophy.<sup>19</sup> There is an apotheosization of Akbar in the text, and this is explicit in Abu'l-Fazl's linguistic and symbolic choices. This might strike contemporary academic historians as problematic and paradoxical. Does not Abu'l-Fazl's eulogistic writing obscure the facts of an official court-sanctioned history behind a veil of language and narration? Is not his then innovative historical methodology, in which he consulted a variety of sources, thus compromised? Rather, contrary to this assumption, Abu'l-Fazl's goal in historical writing is not the composition of an objective, disengaged chronicle, but a conscious, affective narration. Hayden White offers fitting theoretical support for considering Abu'l-Fazl's writing in this context.

## SITUATING HAYDEN WHITE: THE "FICTION" OF HISTORY

The late Hayden White (d. 2018) was an American historian<sup>20</sup> and literary theorist whose historical scholarship is situated within the context of postmodern intellectual developments in the wider academy. White has been considered the forerunner of the "linguistic turn" in the field of history since the publication of his seminal work,

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<sup>19</sup> Abu'l-Fazl was well-versed in works of Arabic, Greek, and philosophy alongside extensive formation with Sufi masters.

<sup>20</sup> Some of his academic peers consider White as a historian, others as a literary theorist, and others as a historian of literary theory. For the purposes of this paper, White will be named as a historian whose historical analysis is heavily informed by literary theory.



*Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*.<sup>21</sup> As a forerunner of both literary analysis of historical texts and narrativist philosophy of history, his work challenged comfortable and oft sacrosanct lines of demarcation in the academy between “history-making” or “history proper,” philosophy of history, and literary studies.<sup>22</sup> With this understanding, and with an eye towards re-reading the *Akbarnāma*, it is important to consider two of White’s most important concerns – history as narrative and tropics of discourse.

### History as Narrative

White’s concern for the subjective nature of history led him beyond the realm of considering only historical, material objects such as maps and coins. He was also interested in the process of historical writing itself. Historical work, most manifestly, is a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse.<sup>23</sup> Intelligible accounts of historical “facts” are organized around a recognizable plot structure, with familiar narrative elements.<sup>24</sup> For White, all historical writing is a form of fiction-making. There is a value to narrativity, inherent in the moral project of history itself. It satisfies the desire to, “have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary.”<sup>25</sup>

With these proposals, White challenged conventional distinctions between philosophy of history (metahistory) and history “proper.” His analysis of the narrative nature of historical reflection upsets the separation between speculative philosophy of history, which often includes teleological assumptions such as those found in the works of Augustine, Hegel, or Marx, and analytical history, which

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<sup>21</sup> Doran, *Philosophy of History After Hayden White*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Herman Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, England: Polity, 2011), 3.

<sup>23</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), ix.

<sup>24</sup> Maza, *Thinking About History*, 214.

<sup>25</sup> White, *Content of the Form*, 24.

denies grandiose historical syntheses. For White, this speculative historical reflection makes explicit what the latter chooses to leave implicit, an artificial separation which only obscures the historical project.<sup>26</sup> Metaphysical neutrality in historical analysis is impossible.<sup>27</sup> In this context White is critical of historians who assume a privileged access with the goal of, “providing a precise and accurate reconstruction of the events reported in the documents.”<sup>28</sup> White challenges the historical *doxa* developed since the work of Leopold von Ranke, where historians had been taught to avoid all speculation and to stick to the “facts” derived from primary source material. Recognition of what history owes to fiction will allow historians to be more lucid and honest about their own practice. It is in adopting these familiar narrative structures and forms of language that historian accomplishes their goal of, “rendering the strange familiar and, of rendering the mysterious past comprehensible.”<sup>29</sup> There is always a moral impulse to the historical project.

*Tropics of Discourse, the “Poetic” Act of History*

The assumption of a narrative nature of history naturally sets the stage for White’s second major contribution, an analysis of the modes of argumentation and tropes of historical writing. This system stems from White’s analysis of nineteenth-century historical writing by figures such as Ranke, Tocqueville, Hegel, and Marx. The dominant tropological mode comprises the “metahistorical” basis of every historical work.<sup>30</sup> For White, discourse is “tropic” by nature, it is the process, “...by which all discourse constitutes the objects which it pretends only to describe realistically and to analyze objectively.”<sup>31</sup> White posits modes of emplotment, modes of argument, and modes of

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<sup>26</sup> White, *Metahistory*, xi.

<sup>27</sup> Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination*, 3-4.

<sup>28</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 52.

<sup>29</sup> White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 94.

<sup>30</sup> White, *Metahistory*, xi.

<sup>31</sup> White, *Tropics of Discourse* 2.

ideology as three levels of explanatory effect in a historian’s work, and tropes as the bases for deep structural forms of the historical imagination.<sup>32</sup> For clarity, I reproduce the chart<sup>33</sup> here:

<b>Trope</b>	<b>Emplotment</b>	<b>Argument</b>	<b>Ideology</b>
<i>Metaphor</i>	<i>Romantic</i>	<i>Formalist</i>	<i>Anarchist</i>
<i>Metonymy</i>	<i>Tragic</i>	<i>Mechanistic</i>	<i>Radical</i>
<i>Synecdoche</i>	<i>Comic</i>	<i>Organicist</i>	<i>Conservative</i>
<i>Irony</i>	<i>Satirical</i>	<i>Contextualist</i>	<i>Liberal</i>

The emplotments,<sup>34</sup> which specify the *type* of story conveyed, are taken from Northrop Frye. They include the satirical, the romantic, the comic, and the tragic. The satirical emphasizes “non-narrativity,” meaninglessness, and non-resolution of human affairs. The romantic emphasizes ultimate triumph of good over evil. The comedic emphasizes social integration and the harmonizable and productive elements of conflict. The tragic resigns to the labor and toil of natural and social conditions.<sup>35</sup>

The formal arguments, which explains the structure and progression of events in a narrative, are taken from Stephen Pepper. They include the formalist, the organicist, the mechanistic, and the contextualist. The formalist emphasizes the individuality and autonomy of historical entities. The organicist emphasizes the integrative nature of historical entities within a larger whole. The mechanistic emphasizes the laws of cause and effect in historical development. The contextualist explains historical entities or “threads” against a particular event or frame of reference.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> White, *Metahistory*, 29.

<sup>33</sup> The original graph is present in White’s *Metahistory*, p. 29, the graph extended to include tropes is found in Paul’s *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination*, p. 78.

<sup>34</sup> I will not explain each trope in detail. An analysis of these can be found in White’s introduction in *Metahistory*.

<sup>35</sup> White, *Metahistory*, 7-11.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-19.

The ideological implications, which reflect ethical values and moral suppositions, are drawn from Karl Mannheim. They include the anarchist, conservative, radical, and liberal. The anarchist emphasizes the corruption of the system in question and need for communal reformation. The conservative emphasizes the natural rhythms of historical development. The radical presents a utopian vision at hand and a call for revolution. The liberal mode presents revolution in governance as key to the history of social progress.<sup>37</sup>

The four tropes are White's contribution to the graphic system; they are the fundamental ground structuring discourse and gives rise to the other three discursive levels.<sup>38</sup> The tropes of discourse are drawn from the four principle tropes of poetic language, the standard of the Western tradition as portrayed by Giambattista Vico. These tropes allow for the portrayal of objects in different kinds of figurative discourse. The four fundamental poetic tropes are metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Metaphor is implied comparison, metonymy is a substitution of a part for the whole, synecdoche is used as a part for the whole, and irony emphasizes the manifestly absurd expression where literal meanings do not make figurative sense.

White argues that these tropics of discourse, "cannot be indiscriminately combined in a given work."<sup>39</sup> There are elective affinities based on structural homologies among the various modes of discourse.<sup>40</sup> The inclusion of tropes of discourse highlights a fundamental conviction of White – the poetic nature of historical writing. This is not a radically new proposal; rather, it is one White traces back to the origins of Western philosophy in Aristotle. Aristotle suggested the complementarity of history and poetry, connecting

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 22-26.

<sup>38</sup> LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 77.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>40</sup> These elective affinities are determined by a horizontal reading across the columns in the given chart. For example, a *romantic* argument often accompanies a *formist* mode of argument, an *anarchist* ideology, and employment of *metaphor* as trope.

them both to philosophy, “in the human effort to represent, imagine, and think the world in its totality, both actual and possible, both real and imagined...”<sup>41</sup> White traces the continuity of this thought into strands of nineteenth-century historical reflection, where Hegel, Droysen, Nietzsche, and Croce advocated for interpretation at the heart of historical reflection in the fact of Ranke’s myth of scholarly objectivity.<sup>42</sup> It’s also present inherently in the work of Vico, who saw not an opposition between the poetic (mythic) consciousness and the prosaic (scientific) consciousness, but a continuity.<sup>43</sup>

Before a given domain can be interpreted, it must be constructed as a ground inhabited by familiar figures. This is both the poetic and the linguistic pre-configuration of historical analysis. The historical process as prefiguring the narrative within a set of reported, documented events is the poetic act of history. The poetry of history occurs when the list of events of the chronicle becomes a story, the historical-poetic imagination has given breath of life to the events “found” in the historical record.

I do not propose to conduct a full critical analysis of White’s scholarship in this space. His thought remains controversial, and other scholars have listed their reservations elsewhere.<sup>44</sup> While I will explore the limitations of his framework later in the paper, I aim only to offer a brief presentation of White’s theoretical framework and main concerns, which will inform an analysis of Abu’l-Fazl’s historical approach and the *Akbarnāma* as historical writing. The following analysis will be limited to a narrative and tropological analysis of the *Akbarnāma* as a document of Mughal historical writing and reflection. In the spirit of thinking *with* White, and his “deeply felt questions” about history, I do not merely attempt to squeeze the *Akbarnāma* into

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<sup>41</sup> White, “Introduction,” 147.

<sup>42</sup> White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 52.

<sup>43</sup> White, *Metahistory*, 31-33.

<sup>44</sup>See, for example, *Textures of Time* by Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam.

White's framework, but to think with White in considering the tropics of discourse in the *Akbarnāma*.

### ABU'L-FAẒL'S EMPLOTMENT OF THE AKBARNĀMA

What was Abu'l-Faẓl's emplotment of the *Akbarnāma*? Rather than pursuing an analysis of the tropes of the *Akbarnāma* in its entirety, I propose a close reading of the first half of the text, which details Akbar's birth, including an astrological and genealogical analysis of Akbar's auspicious reign, up through his ascension to the Mughal throne. Focusing on a particular section may reveal textual layers of discourse and tropes that would otherwise be missed in a broad analysis of the lengthy text. The rich texture of this prose deserves close readings.<sup>45</sup> This is also a necessary approach, as the text was never finished by Abu'l-Faẓl himself and it blends naturally into the *'Ain-i Akbari*, which is now treated as a separate work.<sup>46</sup> I will consider *how* these events are narrated by Abu'l-Faẓl, and what the textures of their narration may reveal about Mughal historical consciousness.

If we were to isolate the "bare events" of the chronicle in the first half of the *Akbarnāma*, it would be a recollection of the following events: visions of Akbar's birth and reign; Maryam Makani's<sup>47</sup> pregnancy; Akbar's birth; the casting of horoscopes which testify to his auspicious birth and future reign; a presentation of his genealogy and biographies of his ancestors up to the Prophet Adam and Alanqoa, the ancestress of Akbar through Gengis Khan; accounts of the victories, successes, and activities of his immediate ancestors; miracles performed by Akbar in his early life; and, his ascension and enthronement. However, there is much more to the text than a simple

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<sup>45</sup> Space is insufficient for a close reading of the full text in this paper, though the entire text deserves a close, meditative reading rooted in narrative analysis.

<sup>46</sup> These are essential restrictions, as this is an analysis of Abu'l-Faẓl's particular emplotment.

<sup>47</sup> This was Akbar's mother.

narration of these events. To begin, Abu'l-Fazl opens with pages of dedication that eludes any historical value as "event." Abu'l-Fazl, following precedent from Persianate literary and Islamic textual traditions, opens with praise and thanks to God, and to Akbar, for the opportunity to write this chronicle. This opening is Abu'l-Fazl's opportunity to demonstrate, from the very inception of the text, his linguistic skill and mastery.<sup>48</sup> He begins with divine praise and admission of human limitation in offering praise:

God is supreme. What a profound realization this is! Its profundity has not been fathomed by those who delve into the depths of reality and reach the minutest points. Those of enlightened minds with eyesight sharp enough to see the rulings of creation and those who wield the compass on the tablet of knowledge have found nothing but the moving breeze and billowing waves that is speech to express the elemental synthesis, the material body, and the exalted essence that cannot fit into the frame of evaluation and is beyond all measure.<sup>49</sup>

The prose then shifts into poetic verse to further elaborate the limitations of human ability:

*What speech is this which has become apparent? It has  
thrown off the veil from the eighteen thousand.  
There is nothing so drunk as it is in this banquet; there is no  
one to challenge its supremacy.  
It solves all problems in this workshop; it sits in the place of  
prominence in this court.  
The heart says with the tongue and speaks into the ear  
everything that comes into the minds of people of awareness.  
From heart to heart it has a path: the power of speech and the  
power of hearing is its arena.  
In the observatory of the mind the moon of speech rises and*

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<sup>48</sup> While I present the text in Wheeler Thackston's English translation for the general reader, this analysis is primarily based on a reading of the original Persian. Any striking disparities between Thackston's translations and the Persian will be addressed.

<sup>49</sup> Allami, *The History of Akbar*, 3.

*sets through the tongue and the ear.*<sup>50</sup>

It seems that, for Abu'l-Fazl, prose is an insufficient literary vehicle to carry particular thoughts at key moments in the text. A shift to poetic quatrains is necessary to convey particularly lofty thoughts. This interjection of poetry into prose is common in Persianate literature, but its presence at key textual moments highlights central events or affective reflections in Abu'l-Fazl's narration.

Abu'l-Fazl then narrates the process of accepting the task of the *Akbarnāma*. After wallowing in his imperfect ability to fully praise both God and Akbar, a divine suggestion encourages his writing:

A message of awareness reached my ear, saying, "O designer in the studio of intrinsic meaning (*naqṣtarāz-i naḡāristān-i m'anī*)...You will write the history of the ruler of the earth, the jewel of the crown of monarchs...It is obvious that in the elemental world there is nothing more magnificent or noble than the precious existence of monarchs, on whose high-mindedness the external order of the world depends. It is certain that to entrust the world to one person and to place the affairs of the world in the hands of one individual is to put the world of meaning in him...particularly a monarch who can detect whiffs of breezes of spiritual spring and grace the throne of success, especially a lord of the age whose heart and mind are watered from an inner spring...who has become a painter in the study of meaning, a host of the banquet of reality...Rule of the material and spiritual and absolute authority over the external and internal are given to him...With the abundant goods of true praise that you possess [O Abu'l-Fazl], why are you standing perplexed in your search?" When I heard these encouraging words, the dawn of fortune broke, the foundation of eternal felicity was laid, the eye of hope became bright...and the countenance of the desired object came into view.<sup>51</sup>

This opening is steeped in language and images from philosophical Sufism and Persian literary symbols. Abu'l-Fazl interestingly identifies himself as, "a designer in the studio of intrinsic

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 13-15.



meaning" (*naqṣṭarāz-i nagāristān-i mʿanī*). Abu'l-Fazl is not merely identifying himself as a chronicler (*muwarriḥ, tariḥī*); he has appropriated for himself key Sufi terminology to describe his task, which is closer to the role of a perceptive seer than a court chronicler. He is honest that his task is not merely recording, but extends to a level of perception necessary for discerning the meaningful flow of events. This sets the foundation for Abu'l-Fazl's conscious *narration* of the events of the *Akbarnāma*.

Following this, Abu'l-Fazl introduces Akbar, the unification of spiritual and temporal power, with pages of flourish:

So long as the leadership of the people of isolation (which is called sainthood) and leadership of the world of reality (which is called sovereignty) were separate in the world, inner struggle was rife among human beings. Today, however, by virtue of high-mindedness...these two lofty ranks, which are the foundations of material and spiritual order, have been bestowed upon this opener of the storehouses of wisdom...Do you know by virtue of whose luminous self this worldwide splendor exists?...It is though the fortune and right of the world emperor of our age, king of kings surrounded by hosts of the renowned, manifestation of divine might, source of infinite generosity, unique at the court of eternity...<sup>52</sup> his regal ascendant is a preface to the felicity of the stars and the planets.

*That<sup>53</sup> king of kings on a level with the sky – the parasol of  
Whose fortune scrapes the heavens –*

...

*Heavenly in appearance, he is an earth of stability; possessor of universal  
intelligence, Jalaluddin.*

*Light of the sun of essence and shadow of God, jewel of the  
Crown and throne, Akbar Shah.*

*Be this ancient world new through him; may his star shed  
rays of light like the sun.<sup>54</sup>*

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<sup>52</sup> This elision represents no less than three full pages of panegyric to Akbar.

<sup>53</sup> The text here shifts from prose to quatrains of poetry to finish the eulogy of Akbar.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 19-27.

Abu'l-Fazl shifts to poetic stanzas to finish his pages of praise to Akbar, highlighting the great value of this event by couching it in the most cherished form in Persian literary culture - a perfectly crafted *qasida*.<sup>55</sup>

This praise spans over twentyfive pages<sup>56</sup> even before the first “event” of the *Akbarnāma* is narrated – Humayun’s vision and portent of Akbar’s birth. Looking at the value of the opening of the *Akbarnāma*, we can evaluate the elaborate nature of the prose, broken up by poetry at key – almost ecstatic – moments. Abu'l-Fazl turns to poetry when his inability to praise God runs short, and he seals Akbar’s apotheosization with a page of poetry, as if prose were insufficient to bear the name of Akbar.<sup>57</sup> The opening alone reveals the poetic nature of the text, the conscious value of its literary craft, and Abu'l-Fazl’s self-assumed role not as “historian” but as “designer of intrinsic meaning,” which mirror’s White’s concept of the narrator who strings together the “events” of the chronicle. In this opening, what a “professional” historian may gloss as mere filler and flourish before the historical events is key to understanding Abu'l-Fazl’s project. I propose to consider the opening sections, which detail the visions and event of Akbar’s birth, with particular attention to the literary nature of this historical account.

### Portents, Visions, and Birth

Abu'l-Fazl, relying on both oral narrations and sections from previous chronicles, offers accounts of portents and visions experienced by Akbar’s ancestors and parents, predicting his miraculous birth and noble reign. He offers accounts of the visions of

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<sup>55</sup> A genre of poetry intended for public, often courtly, narration.

<sup>56</sup> I am referring only to the text as it appears in the bilingual Murty Classical Library edition.

<sup>57</sup> After this key moment of poetic utterance, Akbar is simply as “His Majesty” (*haqrat-i shāhanshāhī*). This restriction of the mention of Jalal al-Dīn Akbar’s name to this singular instance of poetry reveals aspects of the affective nature intended by breaking the prose with stanzas of poetry.

Emperor Humayun, Khan Ataka, Maryam Makani, and Bicha Jan Anaka, among others.<sup>58</sup> Humayun's vision is offered in detail:

On the fourth of Rabi' I in the year 947 [July 9, 1540]...Humayun placed his head upon a pillow to rest...Suddenly he saw on the stage of a dream, which is the private quarters of the unseen realm, that God would grant him a renowned offspring, from whose felicitous forehead would shine rays of magnificence, by whose guidance dark minds would be enlightened, and by the splendor of whose justice the pages of night and day would be brightened...When the emperor awoke, he prostrated himself in thanks and gratitude for this greatest of all good news and then told it to the confidants of his royal harem and loyal attendants.

*This dream, which tore the veil from the eye of the soul, cannot  
Be called a dream – it was wakefulness of the heart.*<sup>59</sup>

Can this event, which offers a precise date and is drawn from another “historical” source, be accepted as empirical data? A professional historian would perhaps disregard these as mere imaginary fancy, as the corruption of Abu'l-Fazl's fictive embellishment. Reading with a narrative analysis, however, we see that Abu'l-Fazl's very careful and embellished narration of this event adds immediate credibility to Akbar's divinely appointed reign. Abu'l-Fazl breaks once more into poetic quatrain to emphasize the reality and gravity of Humayun's vision, which is only understood with spiritual perception. Abu'l-Fazl weaves this event into his poetic narration of the Mughal lineage, it tells the “story” of the “events” in a way to make sense of Akbar's glorious reign within a larger context of perpetual Mughal sovereignty and divine guidance.

Later in the text, on the cusp of Akbar's birth, there is concern that his birth may not coincide with the auspicious time:

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<sup>58</sup> This list includes a strategic variety of Akbar's ancestors and others, include his wet nurse and strangers.

<sup>59</sup> Allami, *The History of Akbar*, 47.

The blessed event occurred when the elevation of the Syrian Dog Star was calculated at 36 degrees, after the elapse of eight hours and twenty minutes from the beginning of the eve of the eight of Aban 464 of the Jalali era, conforming to the eve of Sunday, the fifth of Rajab 949 of the lunar era, which was the sixth of Karttik 1599 of the Indian calendar, and the sixteenth of October 1854 in the Hellenic calendar...One of the strange events that took place near the time of the appearance of the luminary of fortune is that nature had determined the birth prior to the auspicious hour. The astrologer Maulana Chand, who has been commanded by the emperor to be at the threshold of chastity to determine the ascendant, said excitedly, "At present the hour is inauspicious. After several hours an auspicious hour will come, the likes of which does not come for thousands of years. Could the birth not be delayed?" ...at that time a local midwife hideous in appearance was brought to serve. Revolted by the sight of her, H.H. Maryam Makani's balanced temperament was affronted, and therefore the urgency of nature ceased. Then, when the chosen hour arrived...H.H. Maryam Makani awoke with birth pangs, and at that auspicious hour the unique pearl of the caliphate appeared with great fortune.<sup>60</sup>

It's tempting to trove this prose, rich with what appears to be precise dates and eye-witness accounts drawn from "trustworthy" sources,<sup>61</sup> but such an attempt proves elusive and disappointing. Abu'l-Fazl is narrating these *as historical* in a particular way to justify the auspicious nature of Akbar's very being. The particular emphasis on including several calendric systems – the Islamic, the Indian, and the Greek, reveals an attempt to portray Akbar as a universal sovereign. This account resembles a scene from a story, one filled with suspense, characters with personalities, and a peaceful resolution. There are distinct and consciously-crafted plot points in these accounts.

Another passage worth interrogation are the celebrations which occur after the birth of Akbar, which are offered in rich detail and deserve quotation at length:

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<sup>60</sup> Allami, *The History of Akbar*, 65-67.

<sup>61</sup> A key, self-identified methodological principle in Arabo-Islamic and later Persian traditions was a reliance on only those oral sources who were proven to be trustworthy, based on a developed set of criteria.

Celebrations and rejoicing began in the ladies' tents, and a festival of happiness ensued...Fanners with arms of sandalwood perfumed the air, damsels with ambergris-scented locks made fresh the surface of the earth, rosy-cheeked nurses gave joy a new face by sprinkling rose water, laughing girls dressed in purple coated in gold those with silvery breasts by strewing saffron...golden braziers gave off incense on the edges of the carpets...playful dancers began to perform the magic of insensibility, melodic tune-singers muttered trance-inducing incantations.

*Women of delicate voice from Hind  
As beautiful as Indian peacocks  
Chinese instrumentalists of light hand intoxicated  
From wineless goblets.  
Dulcimer players from Khurasan easily stole  
The hearts of the difficult to please.  
Persian singers sang the glad tidings  
of eternal life. ...*

Trays of various fruits were served, tables were set with all sorts of delicacies...What can I say of this rapturous joy? There is no need to elaborate...Enchanting musicians and singers tuned their various instruments and adopted diverse modes; harpists plucked the right strings; lutenists strummed away the cares of the world; dulcimer players made strings from the locks of desire; hot-breathed flutists blew in correct pitch...After the conclusion of the celebration, in accordance with the divine instruction, the babe was given the most exalted and most magnificent name, as has been reported.<sup>62</sup>

The above description goes on for pages, including regular interjections of poetry at key moments of Abu'l-Fazl's narrative ecstasy. What is worthy of note here is the intimate level of detail offered by Abu'l-Fazl. Despite having access to these "events" from other chronicles, he does not simply list the event. He offers an account with rich, specific language. While this could very well be present in previous chronicles, and while it may be that this rich, precise detail was offered by oral sources, the flourish is very likely a

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<sup>62</sup> Allami, *The History of Akbar*, 67-77.

personal addition by Abu'l-Fazl,<sup>63</sup> a product of his own narrative freedom as the author of a text. This very readily displays Abu'l-Fazl's fictive framing of these events. The lushness of the detail in the narration – the well-played notes of the musicians, the trance-inducing tones, the precision of the harpists, the braziers placement at the edges of the carpets - seems to value its affective potential to transport readers to the scene of the event, to make them an aesthetic participant in the pleasure of Akbar's birth. This exemplifies White's intuitions of the narrative and affective nature of thinking about, crafting, and presenting "history." Relying on the quality of the narration, this well-told story, displaces the "events" as the matter of prime importance, for in the well-told (historical) narration, "the explanation of what had happened would figure itself forth from the narrative, in the same way that the structure of a landscape would be figured by a properly drawn map."<sup>64</sup> A transportation to this landscape of Akbar's birth is a conscious element of Abu'l-Fazl's writing. Given the apparent, conscious literary nature of this text, what are the possible emplotment of this opening section, indicative of the wider *Akbarnāma*?

### Emplotment of the *Akbarnāma*

Could Abu'l-Fazl's narration<sup>65</sup> of history fit into White's schema of tropics of discourse? It may be tempting to claim a romantic emplotment of the *Akbarnāma*, which celebrates the ultimate triumph of good in the world with Akbar's birth and reign. In Akbar, spiritual and temporal authority unite, and peace will spread by Akbar's universal reign:

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<sup>63</sup> Confirming the scope of Abu'l-Fazl's narrative flourish demands a close reading of the *Zafarnāma*, which is beyond the current scope of this paper.

<sup>64</sup> White, *Metahistory*, 142.

<sup>65</sup> To expand my analysis of potential emplotments, I consider the first tome of the *Akbarnāma* from the opening through Akbar's enthronement. Space was insufficient to deal with a narrative analysis of all this content in detail.

*Come, observation-making surveyor of the heavens, gaze  
 With a mind that pleases the celestial sphere.  
 Look upon the beauty of the ascendant of the lord of the  
 Conjunction, look upon the book of felicity in this world and the next.  
 See in this happy register  
 felicity upon felicity and light upon light.*<sup>66</sup>

...

It was clear and obvious to the emperor [Humayun], who was privy to heavenly secrets, that the gardener of the world of existence had brought this sapling of the garden of being into existence firstly for comprehending the various degrees of worth of the inhabitants of the world and secondly for healing all the rifts in the age.<sup>67</sup>

...

Thank God, the mention of this exalted dynasty, which is as divinely assisted as the continuum of the heavens, and one end of which is connected to the dawn of creation, Adam, and the other end of which is joined to the rising of the sun of [Emperor Akbar's] existence...<sup>68</sup>

From these passages and others, it seems that Akbar represents an age of felicity, peace, and divine guidance in the earthly realm. In White's system, there are natural affinities between the modes of discourse. If the *Akbarnāma* is written with a romantic emplotment, it follows that the other modes should be a formalist argument, an anarchist ideology, and a primary employment of metaphorical tropes. While the presence of metaphorical tropes seem natural, does it follow that the text presents a formalist mode of argument, which emphasizes the individuality of historical entities, or an anarchist ideology, which emphasizes the need for reformation of a corrupt system? These don't appropriately describe the tone or goals of the *Akbarnāma*, which, like other Islamic texts, emphasizes the continual guidance of divine decree. The anarchist ideology doesn't sit well, as

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<sup>66</sup> Allami, *The History of Akbar*, 81.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 515.

Akbar's birth builds upon his divinely-appointed ancestors from Humayun through Gengis Khan to Adam.

Perhaps Abu'l-Fazl did not write the *Akbarnāma* with a romantic emplotment, but with a comedic emplotment, which would highlight the social integration of Akbar's divinely-appointed reign, and his ability to harmonize the productive elements of the conflict of the world outside of his empire - under the auspices of *sulh-i kul* - with territorial expansion and the extension of his universal reign. It would follow, thus, that the *Akbarnāma* is also written with an organicist argument, a conservative ideology, and synecdoche as the main trope. The *Akbarnāma* displays elements of an organicist argument, with an emphasis on integrative role of Akbar as unifier of temporal and spiritual authority within a larger schema of divine destiny and prophetic history. Likewise, a conservative ideology, which emphasizes the natural rhythm of divinely-guided history, culminating in Akbar's auspicious horoscopes which reflect the cosmic harmony essentialized in his being and reign, seems feasible, along with the presence of synecdoche as a common trope of discourse. This seems like a logical emplotment of Abu'l-Fazl's historical writing.

Despite the sensible nature of this particular emplotment, which would allow the *Akbarnāma* a direct place in White's schema of tropological analysis, the *Akbarnāma's* clean projection onto this series of modes could be problematized. Perhaps the *Akbarnāma* projects more of a contextualist argument, where all of cosmic history leads to Akbar's birth and reign, and where history is interpreted against the particular "historical thread" of Akbar's birth. Additionally, it seems several tropes - metaphor, synecdoche, and metonymy - could be projected onto Abu'l-Fazl's writing. Lastly, does the *Akbarnāma* rather display a liberal mode of ideology? The text was supposedly written in a particular political context of legitimizing Akbar's liberal programs against the criticisms of the 'ulema, and the text is indeed a court-appointed document. Perhaps, then, there is a



liberal mode of ideology present, which presents Akbar's perceptive ability to reform society with his social and religious programs. Does the *Akbarnāma* need a descriptive mode of ideology? Arguably, these modes of ideology draw too heavily from White's analysis of nineteenth-century texts, and do not reflect particular political and ideological developments or concepts in early-modern South Asia. While White does admit that narratives which display tension are the products of genius, perhaps this tropological tension calls for an expansion of White's schema.

### DISCERNING PERSIANATE TROPICS OF DISCOURSE?

While the *Akbarnāma* could be seen as fitting into White's tropological schema – displaying a comedic emplotment, an organicist argument, a conservative ideology, and synecdoche as primary trope – there are ways in which the *Akbarnāma* could transcend these categories or fit into several feasible modes of discourse. Does this mean that White's project is insufficient for analyzing the *Akbarnāma*? Arguably, thinking *with* White in re-reading the *Akbarnāma* entails a potential, and necessary, expansion of his theoretical project.

To begin, was White's analysis always intended to be universal? Is White's analysis, developed primarily from close and extensive readings of nineteenth-century texts, pertinent and applicable to readings of sixteenth-century Persian texts? White himself called for more cross-cultural readings, and was open to the presence of other modes of emplotment beyond the stable four of his current schema.<sup>69</sup> As has been revealed, White's literary analysis bears deep and natural affinities with the Persianate literary evaluation of historical writing. I propose that White's system of tropological analysis would benefit from a creative consideration of potential indigenous Persianate tropics of discourse and modes of emplotment. Perhaps exploring the nuances of Persianate literature – historical and non-historical, poetry and prose – could reveal

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<sup>69</sup> White, *Metahistory*, 8.

indigenous and natural Persianate tropics of discourse that differ from White's developed schema.

The Persian canon is home to a dazzling array of literary genres.<sup>70</sup> Aside from the sub-genres of poetry - which include the *qasīda*, the favored poetic form of courtly performance, the *maṭnavi* as versified narrative, and the *ghazal*, which represents a style of private, intimate poetry - well-known genres of Persian literature include the romance and epic.<sup>71</sup> Less-explored genres in Persianate writing include the *malfūzāt* (collections of Sufi conversations), *maktūbāt* (collections of letters and correspondence), *firmān* (royal decrees), *akḥbārāt* (official newsletters), *baḥar* (memoirs), and *tadkirāt* (biographical memoirs).<sup>72</sup> While there is some overlap among these genres, there is surely some variation present that distinguishes this tradition from the particular forms of nineteenth-century writing that formed the basis of White's theory. Perhaps these various genres could be explored for the way recurring symbols, tropes, or structures lend themselves to a tropological analysis similar to White's.

Potential indigenous modes of discourse can be discerned. One is the *faḍa'il*, which refers to a particular category of literature that exposes the excellences of particular things, persons, or places for the purpose of praise.<sup>73</sup> The *faḍa'il* could perhaps be considered an indigenous emplotment or ideology in the Persian tradition. The presence of various other devices, such as *murāt-i naẓir* (maintaining images of similar properties) and *ḥusn-i talīl* (fanciful reasoning)<sup>74</sup> in Persian literature could perhaps be considered as indigenous tropes which support other modes of emplotment, argument, and ideology.

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<sup>70</sup> Due to space restrictions, I will not enter into a lengthy discussion of the content or form of these genres and styles.

<sup>71</sup> Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1993), 897-898.

<sup>72</sup> Roy, "Indo-Persian Historical Thoughts and Writings: India 1350-1750," 155-159.

<sup>73</sup> Sharma, *Mughal Arcadia*, 92.

<sup>74</sup> Wheeler M. Thackston, "Literature," in *The Magnificent Mughals*, ed. Zeenut Ziad (Oxford, England; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 90-91.

A particularly innovative expansion that the Persianate literary tradition may offer to rethinking White's analysis of the affective nature of historical narration would be the transcendence of the medium of writing as the primary vehicle for conveying affective, narrative meaning in historical narration. In Persianate cultures, poetry was one prized artistic medium alongside calligraphy and intricately painted miniatures. The most prized copies of the *Akbarnāma*, and other chronicles, in the Mughal archives, and those cherished and studied for aesthetic refinement, were those also adorned with masterful calligraphy and intricate miniatures, which informed and shaped the overall didactic experience of the text.<sup>75</sup> This points to affective aesthetic consumption which transcends the experience of the written text itself, and raises questions about the media and materiality of meaning-creation in historical narration. Such proposals demand further reflection and investigation.

Perhaps in an extensive reading of Persian literary discourses, one may discern Persianate tropes of discourse to complement White's system, and to expand the *Akbarnāma* as a comedic, organicist, conservative text to include modes of discourse more familiar to the Persianate tradition. Such an enormous project demands a wide and perceptive engagement with classical Persian literature, something beyond the scope of this paper. I mention this proposal as one that may necessarily expand White's project and locate the *Akbarnāma* more fittingly into the narrative framework of historical writing in which it consciously places itself. This expansion has the potential to be immensely enriching for the study of history and historiography in South Asia and the wider Persianate world.

## CONCLUSIONS: MUGHAL (AND MODERN) POETICS OF HISTORY

An analysis of the *Akbarnāma* with the narrative analysis of White reveals the nature of Persianate historical writing, and Mughal historical writing in particular, as a conscious blend of historical

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<sup>75</sup> Sharma, *Mughal Arcadia*, 58.

documentation and cultivated literary expression which primarily emphasizes the aesthetic quality of its reading and the affective impact of its consumption. If by history we intend a project to cultivate and transmit an archive and record of empirical facts, we would be relying on a sense of history that was profoundly foreign to Persianate authors and historians. If we think, however, as White does, that the telling of history is ultimately a narrative strategy which weaves “events” of a chronicle into a meaningful story, then the *Akbarnāma* is doing that consciously, unabashedly, and with the full literary prowess of a skilled savant like Abu’l-Fazl.

While White’s system could be expanded to creatively include tropics of discourse indigenous to sixteenth-century Persianate writers and other well-developed literary traditions, re-reading the *Akbarnāma* within the framework of White’s narrative analysis reveals a complexity and texture to Abu’l-Fazl’s narration that would otherwise be out of reach if we approached the *Akbarnāma*, like past European historians and scholars, as a mere repository of historical fact obscured by its fictive framework. White’s project, particular among a range of contemporary theoretical lenses, makes the insights of Persianate historical consciousness more palatable to a contemporary academic audience, and perhaps echoes of White’s theory in Persianate historical documentation may help to reinforce White’s project, rooted in that ancient and indigenous strand of Western thought which readily admits the poetic nature of historical reflection, as a valuable contribution to contemporary historical methodology. This re-reading of the *Akbarnāma* reveals the rich dimensions of Persianate historical writing and offers interesting avenues for reimagining the study of history in South Asia.