



Interview: Hayden White: The Image of Self-Presentation

Ewa Domanska; Hans Kellner; Hayden White

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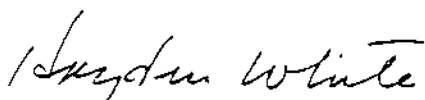
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INTERVIEW



HAYDEN WHITE

The Image of Self-Presentation

One of the most famous and controversial books in the philosophy of history, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, was published twenty years ago. The author—Hayden White—does not want to come back to this book. He says, “*Metahistory* is passé.” But is it? Such a statement may be a sign of a consciously used rhetorical strategy, an intellectual flirtation with critics and readers in order to create a new context, to make the book fresh and provoke a rereading of it.

I interviewed Hayden White in February 1993 during his visit to Groningen, The Netherlands. The central part of this text contains fragments from this interview.

Additional text, at the sides of the pages, originates from an interview in February 1993 with Hans Kellner, which also took place in Groningen.

I have altered none of White’s and Kellner’s passages. Both interviews, in original form, were authorized by the authors. Only the titles are mine.

Ewa Domanska

When I said, in the title of my first essay on White, "Hayden White's linguistic humanism" and linked him to Valla, to Vico, the whole humanism tradition, I think he sensed that this was where he had stood. For all of this fascination with Foucault, he was in no way part of the death of man, the death of the author, the death of the reader, this sort of postmodern world of simply colliding functions. He simply doesn't want to live in that world. And this is why I related him back to Sartre and existentialism and above all to the question of choice.

The question of the political, social danger of questioning the referent of history, the result of what White called his being a "deviant" in the 1970s, remains a crucial question. In White's work of the '80s, particularly in the essays collected in *The Content of the Form*, he talks about that and emphasizes that he in no way belongs to the poststructuralist camp of those who deny the reality of evidence and historical facts.

White on Himself

I am not a philosopher. I mean, the philosophers recognize that. People like Rorty claimed to like *Metahistory*, but they don't think of it as philosophy. I thought, at the time, that I was doing intellectual history; I call myself a cultural historian. I'm interested in culture, in philosophy of culture. But I'm not trained as a philosopher, and I don't do the kind of rigorous philosophical analysis that my friend Arthur Danto does. I don't participate in the philosophers' world, but I would say the same thing about people like Vico and Croce. Croce and Nietzsche didn't have a degree in philosophy.

I think some people have [connected me with postmodernism], but in fact Linda Hutcheon, who works on it, always insists that I am a modernist, that I am stuck in modernism. And I agree. I see my own project as modernist. My whole intellectual formation, my own development took place within modernism. By that I mean a specifically Western—or in Russia the equivalent will be something like the futurist or symbolist—cultural movement: in the West, the great modernist experiments of Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Eliot, Pound, and also a number of people who wrote history, like Spengler and Theodor Lessing.

I am formalist and structuralist.

My conception of history has much more in common with the kind of aesthetic of the sublime which derives from Romanticism than with postmodernism, which is much more hip.

I don't mind what anyone calls me. I don't think labels are important. My view is this: don't worry about labels or schools. Here is a book. Read it. If it helps you in your own work—good; if it doesn't—forget it!

White on Metahistory

Metahistory is something historians don't like. But some people in other disciplines do, philosophers and literary critics. Because what it does, or pretends to do, is to

I asked him what he considered himself and he said, I swear, "I am a writer." Just like that. I tried to make sense of that statement a long time ago. It sounded typically flippant, and I think at that time he must have had Barthes in mind. I really think there was a period in which he felt that the proper model for the intellectual today was someone like Roland Barthes. Barthes was the first exemplar of a kind of cultural critic, which is another phrase he used for himself in *Tropics of Discourse*, where he called himself a cultural critic and studying cultural criticism. He was doing that sort of thing before its time, before it became so dreadfully ideological and rigid as it has. He has always maintained an irony and flexibility characteristic of the writer who simply is interested in rhetoric, both as a way of experiencing the world and as a process of production. That's what I would say. White is a writer.

In *Tropics of Discourse*, he says, in effect, "I am not ashamed to call myself a Kantian, and I'm not ashamed to emphasize this notion of will which is precisely the cover for something you cannot delve beyond."

deconstruct a mythology, the so-called science of history. It is against positivism, against a positivistic notion of history.

My critics said to me: "Well, *Metahistory* is too formalist. It doesn't say anything about the author, about the audience, about praxis." And I said: "Yes, OK, let's start thinking about the author." And I started to ask questions about intentionality. But I'm inclined to follow people like Foucault and Barthes. So I say the text in some sense is detached from the author. When the text is actually published, the author is not the best interpreter of it any longer. And that's a poststructuralist way of thinking. Beyond that, poststructuralism depends upon semiotic conceptions of the sign. I think that texts, novels, poems, histories have a certain instability, just on the basis of the inner dynamics of the process of discourse formation that deconstruction tells us about. Textualism is an interesting ideology. It's an ideology, but it yields some insights that I find helpful.

The Marxists in my own country and abroad, for example Mogilnitsky in Russia, say: "This is formalism." I say, "Yes, it's formalist!" Why? Because I think no one had ever done a formalist analysis of the historian's text.

Young people now come and read it and they think that it is something helpful to them. They sometimes act as if it had been written yesterday. And then they write me letters and say, "You say so and so. What did you mean?" I say, "I don't know. I was writing in a different milieu at that time and, by the way, for different purposes, than I would write for today and for a different audience." I mean, I certainly wouldn't like to write this book again. So, too, when the people say to me, "I love *Metahistory*. I am applying its principles to my own work," I say, "It's not meant to be applied. It's analytical. It does not tell you how to do something!" Psychologists write to me and say that they use the theory of tropes which I developed to treat their patients. So they will talk about the metaphoric mind or consciousness, or metonymic; and I say, "That's being very literal-minded. I only used the concept of tropes metaphorically. It's not supposed to be taken literally."

The question is: Is *Metahistory* a work of literary theory of the historical text (as is suggested by the subtitle *The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, or is it a rhetorical intervention into the historiographical debate for the purpose of changing the habits and ways of thinking of readers of history?

Many people said that *Metahistory* had some virtues, but many more said that it was wrong. But the next generation of young people came along, and they were working against the inherited authorities; they looked for a deviant, an alternative, way. Young historians who were not satisfied with the ways in which they had been taught to think about historical research found something useful in my book; and it still sells a lot. It's had eight printings. I don't think people really want to read it; it's an intimidatingly long book. It's very tiresome and repetitive. Most people who read it read some of the introduction and maybe read around a bit. But no one reads it through. By the way, I don't think that in order to have an effect, you must produce books that people want to read. It's the project that interests people and not so much a particular way of doing it. I think the gesture of the project is toward innovation and changing the way we think about history.

Metahistory is a result of a historical investigation; it is just a study of nineteenth-century historical writing. I mean, I was studying the nineteenth-century writing of history. That is a historical project. But I thought, I need some principles for organizing and characterizing the different ways the nineteenth century did history, wrote about history. That's why I started with the historian's text. It seemed to me that the way most people had written the history of history writing was to listen to what the historians had said they did, rather than analyzing what they actually wrote. Ranke, for example, pointed out: we go to the archives, we study this, we study that, we come out, we arrange the things, then we write it up. There is the research phase, and there is the writing phase. I found that if we start not with that kind of information but look at the text itself, you can see that a lot of times they have said things that they don't recognize, that can't be justified on the basis of their reports about the research. The composition of the historian's text, just on the basis of compositional considerations themselves, transforms the materials that they have worked up from the archives. So I needed a way of characterizing different

He would say,
"Ricoeur is passé,
Derrida is passé,
Foucault is passé,
Metahistory is passé.
I'm passé." He was
saying all these things
in order to open up a
space in which new
things could be said
and in which you are
free to be critical.

White does not want to be turned into a monument. He wants always to be part of the action. So he will say, "That part of me is passé. That's gone. I don't remember *Metahistory* because I'm always interested in what's around me right now. So forget everything that happened in the past." In the same sense that Roland Barthes did.

styles of representation. That's why I started studying literary theory. People like Northrop Frye, but not only Frye—Kenneth Burke and others.

Basically, my book *Metahistory* is structuralist. It also has the limitations of structuralism.

What I would say about *Metahistory* is that White built a framework there that allowed him to go in and be the virtuoso reader he was able to be. His continued work with tropology as a methodology, however, contradicts what I just said. I find it interesting. But after *Metahistory*, for about seven years, White hammered home the idea of tropology as an available master discourse in all those essays that form *Tropics of Discourse* and in a number of other essays that were never collected in a book. He spelled out tropology over and over, extending it, broadening it, adapting it a little bit but keeping it as basically a kind of, almost a straitjacket for, discourse. And then in the 1980s he shelved it. And in *The Content of the Form*, his collection of basic essays from the 1980s, I think "trope" appeared once, casually. Suddenly he turned to something else, and that something else is narrative.

White on His Theory

Why did I use this tropology, this theory of tropes? Because narrative writing is not informed by logic. There is no narrative that ever displays the consistency of a logical deduction. And anyone who ever wrote a story that could provide rules of deduction for deducing one phase of a story from another would be a very unsuccessful storyteller. So I thought that you needed either an alternative logic or a logic of narrative composition, which you can find in modern rhetoric. You don't find it, I think, in ancient rhetoric.

I believed that Hegel's dialectic, that Hegel's Logic, is an attempt to formalize practical thinking. When people relate to one another in politics and love, they don't relate syllogistically. It's not a syllogism. That's something else. It's an enthymeme. And most compositions—most of everyday speech—are enthymemic. They do not follow rules of logical deduction; they are not syllogistic.

So, as both J. S. Mill and Hegel realized, you need another kind of logic to talk about practical affairs, a logic of praxis. The logic of praxis cannot follow the logic of identity and noncontradiction. Society creates situations in which you must act in contradiction.

Lives are made up of contradictions. So you need a theory of the representation of life lived in contradiction. That would allow you to account for the syntax of real lives. In the study of narrative, people who try to provide a logic of narrative fail. They try to provide a grammar of narrative, and they fail. Because the point and fact is that a narrative is not a large sentence. And grammar can only tell you about sentences, not about discourses. In the same way,

I think that narrative is a code for tropology, or, [to say it] another way, that tropology is a code for narrativity. At least for Hayden White.

The turn to narrative in the '80s was only a renaming. This "confusion" deepens and humanizes the tropes, which seemed very dehumanized at first. I mean, his first readings of Foucault were basically of Foucault as a tropologist. In the '80s, and particularly with the encounter with Louis O. Mink and with Paul Ricoeur, came this emphasis on narrative and the notion that humans were basically narrating animals. And I think that White believes that.

What White did about that was to say, "I'm not going to judge whether it is right or wrong. I'm not going to play this game," very frequently in *Metahistory*, in particular. White can be accused of avoiding particular kinds of arguments. What about coherence versus correspondence? He simply says, "I'm not interested at all in that. That is not relevant to the kind of game I'm playing here in a direct way. Read the rest of my work and you can probably figure out where I stand. But if I get caught up in that discourse, playing that game, in that language, first of all I won't be doing the kind of thing that I intend to do, I will be writing different books, and secondly I won't be able to move or get very far, because that discourse is already so highly worked out and entangled that almost all the moves in it have already been made by someone."

sylogistic logic can only tell you about propositions. But although there are propositions in narratives, narrative itself is not an extended set of propositions. The components of narrative are not propositions only. There are extrapositional components, and they have to do with syntax. But it is not a grammatical syntax. It is a syntax of language use, beyond the sentence. It's putting sentences together. You can link sentences together by logic, or you can do it by tropologic: tropology because you need a theory of swerve, of systematic deviation, from logical expectation. That's what is fascinating about narrative. It can't be governed by strict rules of logical deduction. So I turned to rhetorical theories, because I believed that rhetoric provides the theory of improvisational discourse.

Since Plato, the philosophers claimed that rhetoric is suspect, duplicitous, artificial and that logic is natural. That's ridiculous! Plato was prejudiced against the Sophists because Plato was an idealist who believed in absolute truths. And rhetoric is based upon a genuinely materialistic conception of life; it is skeptical. Gorgias and Protagoras recognized that there is no such thing as one correct way of speaking and representing the world, because language is arbitrary in its relationship to the world that it speaks about. And what was proper speech, correct or truthful speech, depended on who had power to determine it. So rhetoric is the theory of the politics of discourse, in my estimation. It says that discourse is worked out in conflicts between people. Those who determine who will have the right, the power, and authority to say what correct speech is and those who attempt to name correct speech, in other words, to legislate it, are always authoritarian, from Plato on. What the rhetorician knows is that meaning is always being produced, that truth is produced, not found. That is why I think that a rhetorical conception of forms of discourse like history, which can't be formalized, provides some kind of equivalent to what poetics tries to do with its analysis of poetic diction and speech.

Poetics doesn't predict how the poem should be written. It doesn't give rules. But

after the poems are written, you can reflect on them and see different structures.

No one would say that poetry doesn't give us insight into the world; at least it gives us insight into language. So I think that's true but also about all sorts of discourses like history that are not sciences. History is not a science. What is it, then?

[History has a double face: a scientific one and an artistic one.] That's what makes it interesting. You're always facing in two directions. But the historians don't know that, because since the nineteenth century they have been taught that they must keep literary and poetic effects out of their writing. So what they say is, "You do your research as a scientist, but then, when it comes to writing, it's okay, make it pretty so that people can read it easily; but your writing does not add anything except cosmetics to your truth," let's say. And that's wrong. Any modern linguist knows that the form of the representation is a part of the content itself. That's why I call my most recent book *The Content of the Form*. It's consistent with ideas developed since Lukács and critics like Fredric Jameson stressed that ideology has to do with the form of the thing as much as with the content of the given representation. To choose the form is already to choose a semantic domain.

I am really trying to work now on the development of the notion of tropic as a continuum of logic, dialectic, and poetic. And I would say, instead of rhetoric, tropic—tropic being a theory very much like that of Jakobson. Jakobson's thesis was this: you can't distinguish between poetic language and nonpoetic language. There is a poetic function, and in some discourses the poetic function is dominant; in others it is not, but it's still there.

My question is this: if the old nineteenth-century easy distinction between fact and fiction can no longer be maintained, and if we instead see them as a continuum in discourse, then I would ask, What is the "fictional function" in nonfictional discourse, or in discourse which tries to be nonfictional? Because anyone who writes a narrative is fictionalizing. I use the term

White has at least two different ways of discussing the question of historical truth, I think. In the first place, in the first section of *Metahistory*, he deals very briefly with the state of the argument up to then in Anglo-American philosophy of history. There were two basic alternative theories: one, correspondence theory, in which statements correspond to some definable referents for their reality, one way or another, and secondly, a coherence theory, in which discourses created somehow their own sense of self-referential coherent truth.

He is trying to deal with a permanent stable structure that will enable and permit an indefinitely large number of possible situations. In a sense it is the same kind of goal—a generative grammar of historical discourse that Chomsky was looking for in the 1950s and '60s in terms of syntactic structures. White still believes in that sort of thing; I'm glad of that, because part of me does too. I think it was a very excellent venture. Declaring structuralism and the structuralist project to be dead and over—well, it's just a moment in time. It needs to be made relevant over again to new needs and new situations. I'm glad to hear that he still wants to do that.

“poetic”; I use “rhetoric.” The problem with both of these terms is that already their connotations are so connected with Romanticism and Sophism that they turn people off; they are not helpful. One needs a different set of terms, and I am increasingly thinking that I have got to work out a theory of tropics. That’s why I come back to the study of Vico again.

Vico represented two conceptions of rhetoric: you can see rhetoric as the art of persuasion, or you can see rhetoric as the science of discourse. It was tropology as a basis for a science of discourse that I found in Vico.

I needed some way of thinking about how you coordinate levels of argument and connections between different parts of the narrative that was not those of logical connections. I was teaching Vico, and he suggested to me the new way of thinking about the different aspects of complicated discourses, like history. It’s not a matter of being logical. It’s tropical. It’s put very crudely in *Metahistory* because I didn’t know anything about rhetoric then. I had been taught that rhetoric is a bad thing. It’s immoral, it’s not interested in the truth, it’s interested only in persuasion.

My notion of rhetoric, which comes from Vico, is more like that of Gorgias and Protagoras and is a philosophy. Cicero’s rhetoric is not philosophy. He says there is philosophy here, and then there is rhetoric; and Quintilian says, “No, there is philosophy, and then you use rhetoric to teach schoolboys.” But the inventors of rhetoric, Gorgias and Protagoras and all the people who were attacked by both Plato and Aristotle, really were philosophers of language.

Rhetoric is philosophy; it’s a materialist philosophy and presumes an entire ontology. What the Sophists taught is that metaphysics is impossible (I learned that from Paolo Valesio): the very thing that Heidegger finally tried to teach in the nineteenth century. And rhetoric is conceived as a theory of how meaning is produced, of how meaning is constructed, not how meaning is found. Plato believes that you can find meaning; it is in things.

[The most important features of White’s theory] would be the tension between White’s attention to the unstable, shifting rhetorical situation and his continuing emphasis on structures and forms, which make that moment possible. This tension in White parallels the tension in much American criticism of the last twenty years. For one thing, White himself is very sensitive to disruptions and free and indeterminate things that occur when you find yourself in a particular situation. This I call the sort of existentialist absurdity of moments in time.

There are a lot of applications of rhetoric to contemporary historical writing. But the historians don't like it, because they think that, in what they are doing, there isn't any rhetoric. They always resist. They resist anyone who tries to tell them something about what they are doing.

There are many different ways of studying history, and we study it for different reasons. There is no possibility of legislating an orthodoxy about the way history is to be studied.

One can improvise different techniques of representation for the past, and that's why the writing of history has a different kind of history from the study of physics. We have only to look at the history of historical writing to recognize that there are different stylistic variations. And what is really naive about historians is that they always think that the current way of doing history is finally the best way.

If we look back at someone like Michelet, we say, "Well, too bad, we are superior to him. He was naive." Modern historians look back on Voltaire, or Ranke, or Burckhardt, and they presume, "Yes, they were experimenting with different ways of writing history. They were interesting as writers, but we have a superior way of doing history." And I think that is always an illusion.

It's impossible to legislate the way people are going to relate to the past because, above all, the past is a place of fantasy. It doesn't exist anymore. One can only study it by way of things that have been left as effects; the events of history by definition are not replicable. We can't repeat it as you can repeat physical events in a laboratory. You can't replicate—by definition—historical events. They are no longer perceivable. So they can't be studied empirically. They can be studied by other, nonempirical kinds of methods; but there is no way of finally determining what is the best theory for studying and guiding research in history.

Most historians, I think, would agree that there can be no ultimate theory of history. But you can have a theory of historical writing. I mean, you can step back

So what does the concept of being "passé" mean? Are Shakespeare, or Michelet, or Tocqueville passé? The answer is: yes and no. I think, as White taught us, that the rhetorical responsibility, if we want to accept it, is to create new contexts in which those individuals would not be passé, in which they will be changed in such a way as to serve our purposes in the new context, for a new audience and a new problem.

and look at historical writing in the same way that you have philosophy of science. Philosophers of science don't tell physicists how to do science. They reflect on what the physicists are doing in order to make some statements about the epistemological presuppositions of physics.

Conclusion

White is a rhetorical personality. It's not that you mustn't take what he says seriously. It's always serious. But you must always look very carefully at the context in which he is saying it.

This is an individual who has thought about the needs of particular moments and circumstances.

I don't even believe in interviews. What are you getting from me? You are not getting any definitive statement. You're getting another version. I would say that what I do stems from the fact that, as with most historians, the past has always been a problem for me.

He has had this fascination with Barthes ever since I have known him. It was simply Barthes's originality, his rhetorical originality. I think White was aware from the beginning that Barthes was always playing with the readers. And in a sense, White is doing the same thing.

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