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History and Literature: An Interview with Hayden White

by

Angeliki Spiropoulou

Angeliki Spiropoulou: In your scheme of analysis of the way in which historians have thought and written about the past (i.e., the ‘historical’ as opposed to the ‘practical past’), a correspondence is established between the historical experience of specific events (or a specific experience of historical events), historical consciousness and linguistic representation. Could you explain how you see the relationship between historical representation, historical knowledge and truth?

Hayden White: Since the historical object is not observable, any given event or set of events has to be constructed as historical before it can be subjected to a specifically historical analysis. This process of historicisation can only be a process of figuration (a schematisation, in Kant’s terminology) in which real events are encoded as happening in a historical scene and as ‘caused’ by historical agents. This representation of historical events is as much imaginative as it is rational and provides an object of potential study of the mode of understanding. The connection of the constructed scene-action to a larger environment provides a kind of explanation, by emplotment in a narrative, which connects events by assigning them places in a beginning-middle-end scenario. The events of the past are ‘given’ but only as past, not as historical. They are rendered historical by an initial description in a figurative mode, and then ‘conceptualised’ as a story of a particular kind. Truth? The truth is not in things or in their relationships. The truth is in the statements made about past events dressed up as figures of history (the title, incidentally, of a recent book by Jacques Rancière): they are either adequate to the figures (schemata) of human understanding given in the initial description or they are not.

A.S.: Your work evokes Walter Benjamin's notion that every present invents its own past or Benedetto Croce's idea that all history is contemporary history. What would the role of the subject and the context be in historical narratives?

H.W.: I would have to know which 'subject' you are talking about: the subject of history (i.e., the actors and agencies of historical changes) or history's subjects (i.e., the specific kinds of people who are deemed worthy of appearing in a history because they are the kind of people who 'make' history). Or by the subject of history, do you mean the historian or whomever it is that assumes the authority to speak for history? As you know, I distinguish between the past of history, which places history within a larger time-portion of 'the past,' and history's past (which subordinates the past to the historians who produce it). In the former, history is treated as a part of the past in general, while in the latter, the past is treated as historical only insofar as it yields to history's criteria of significance.

A.S.: You have insightfully pointed out that historical discourse is not defined by a specific method of approaching the past and neither is its subject matter (e.g., past events, facts, experiences) exclusive to it. On the contrary, historical study, in common with literary writing/theory, principally involves a narrative reconstruction or interpretation of its subject matter. In view of this thesis, what would the role of the artwork in historical studies be and, additionally, what is special in the relationship between history and literature?

H.W.: If we are looking for similarities between history and literature, we have to do so by examining the linguistic protocols by which some part of the past is constructed as 'history' or as 'historical.' One way to do this is to treat historiography and literature as kinds of artistic writing, which is to say that both differ from 'ordinary speech/language' by virtue of the use of certain devices, tropes, thematisations, and so on that are either not found in ordinary (communicative) speech or are only implicitly present in them (as in, for example, the use of metaphor or metonymy). Both kinds of literary writing, a history such as that of Herodotus and a novel such as De Lillo's *Underground*, are products of the (Kantian) imagination or, following Lacan and Castoriadis, dwell in 'the imaginary.' The older historiography, which sought to purge itself of both 'literary' and 'philosophical' language and thought, presupposed a condition of literalness or, in oral discourse, 'propriety,' as a basis for a discourse purged of both rhetoricity and *poiesis*.

But as Laclau argued in the last book before his death, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, there is no degree-zero of rhetoricity. Speech and language are inherently rhetorical in the sense of being unable to avoid figures of speech and

thought, use of tropes, and such devices as ablation and irony. Historians wish to speak literally, which is to say, properly —but the proper is a moral category, not an epistemic one, and what is meant by the literal meaning of a word or sign is nothing more than what a given group of speakers of a given language have decided by use and convention is the literal meaning. One thing that ‘literature’ always does, in contrast to non-artistic speech, is systematically experiment with the distinction between literal and figurative (or proper and improper) speech in order to render the language used to present a given reality more precisely, more ‘concretely,’ or more ‘dramatically.’ This is why, when I am asked for an example of a modern literary treatment of historical reality, I cite one or another novel such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, De Lillo’s *Underground*, or Roth’s *American Pastoral*: following Barthes, I call these examples of ‘novelesque history.’ I might also have cited *Between the Acts* by Virginia Woolf —as interpreted by Angeliki Spiropoulou.

A.S.: In your discussion of modernism, you write that there are certain events, distinctive to modernity, which cannot be represented in the realist mode privileged by traditional historiography. They need to be represented in some new mode, proposed by plotless, multivocal modernist writing which is reflexive of the narrativisation process. However, wouldn’t this imply that you take historical experience, the historical referent, to be prior to the means of its representation since it appears to generate the demand for new forms? And if this is so, how is it related to your argument that ‘the content is the form’?

H.W.: This is a good question, but like many such questions it ignores the distinction between events of the past and historical events. Events in the past (already written about in many cases) are what is ‘given’ in the sense of preceding the historian’s interest in them. But not all events of the past are historical events; they must be ‘worked up’ as possible objects of a specifically ‘historical’ or ‘novelistic’ treatment before they can serve as ‘referents.’ The demand for new forms or modes or even genres of presentation arises with the appearance of events unclassifiable immediately by traditional modes of classification. In modernity, a case in point would be the kinds of microscopic events that are in principle not observable but must be inferred as having happened by virtue of the traces of their occurrence in, for example, bubble chambers for measuring the path of an electron or the beginning of the universe itself. The demand for new forms of presentation arises when someone or some group ‘experiences’ an event that, for that group, is unthinkable or unutterable. To grasp the ‘meaning’ of an event as ‘historical’ is to apprehend it as a pattern, a form of being in the world. Within what we think we already know as ‘historical reality,’ what Marx called the modes and means of production produce events unthought of in anyone’s philosophy, such as

destruction of the ozone layer around the earth. Indeed, the whole idea of eco-history would have been unthinkable before modern technology.

A.S.: In many of your writings, you connect the experience and the structure of trauma with both modernist art and modernity as a historical period, evoking the Holocaust as an exemplar. It is particularly interesting that, inversely, you seem to be suggesting that a modernist mode of representing traumatic events, peculiar to modernity, resists the symbolic closure and mastery of anxiety or ‘narrative fetishisation’ sought by realist narration. Perhaps you could elaborate on these connections around what you call ‘the modernist event.’ Could you also explain why you think the experience of trauma may not appropriately describe the experience of the nineteenth century, for example, and whether trauma can be considered a paradigmatic *topos* and trope of postmodern or contemporary, alongside modernist, writing?

H.W.: Well, of course, ‘trauma’ is a concept produced by psychoanalysis and can be applied to any event experienced by a group as disabling and omnipresent long after the event that caused it has passed, and demanding attention in whatever situation the traumatised person finds itself. The utility and relevance of the concept of trauma in the twentieth century has to do not only with the novelty of modernist techno-events, their scope, their reach, their shock value, but also with the speed of news of their occurrence by way of the electronic media. The transmission of news by vivid (colored) images, the number of images of any given event, and the violation of the privacy of those affected by events of an extreme nature, all of this has the effect of rendering extreme events palpable in a way that transmission by writing or print does not. A postmodernist artistic movement such as Surrealism seems ‘super-’ or ‘hyper-’ real only in contrast to what we might call—from our perspective today—the ‘coziness’ of nineteenth-century events like ‘the revolutions’ of that century. Napoleon’s campaign in Russia, the Paris Commune, and the Boer War appear in retrospect to be containable in well-wrought stories. But who can tell the story of Hiroshima or the Holocaust in a way that does justice to the ‘quality’ of the suffering endured by thousands of people on a single day of their ‘surprising’ occurrence.

A.S.: Interestingly, history is both an ostentatious concern and a method within contemporary literature, thus contrasting with modernism, whose emphasis on form resulted in a more controversial referential relationship to history than that evident in the classical historical novel. You have convincingly vindicated a historical concern for modernism. However, would you identify any qualitative differences between modernist and postmodernist art in treating history and

history writing?

H.W.: Postmodernism is used in the Anglophone world as a term of derision, except for a few intellectuals such as Richard Rorty and on occasion me. Fredric Jameson is of course the writer who has studied postmodernism as the cultural equivalent of 'the cultural logic of late capitalism.' In his view, postmodernism manifests the total triumph of capitalism understood as the commodification of culture and the social relations of production. Postmodernism as thus understood is what comes after modernism, itself a mode of epochal self-consciousness produced by the conflict between the realities of agrarian and industrialised societies. This is quite different from Lyotard's conception of postmodernism as a repudiation of all 'grand narratives' and especially that of the 'hidden hand' and 'progress.' As a historian of culture, I see modernism (in the arts, fashion, architecture, literature, the social and human sciences, and the like) as a response (and not only a reaction) to the modernisation of societies, which is to say, a response to capitalism, commodification, consumerism, value as exchange-value, etc. I do not see modernism as nostalgic for 'a world we have lost' but as a Nietzsche-like acceptance of the nihilism implicit in capitalism, its institutions and practices, and a commitment to go forth within this nihilism to the revivification of what remains valuable in spite of the commodification of culture.

According to this view, postmodernism is produced by the carrying out of this nihilistic impulse. It presupposes the ruination of traditional cultural institutions and asks what can be done with the 'waste' now produced. I agree with the late Arthur Danto that Marcel Duchamp was the herald of a genuinely post-modernist artistic practice: the art of the ready-made, the *objet-trouvé*, the copy and especially the mechanically re-produced copy, the simulacra which ironises 'art' itself. Whereas the modernists were frightened by the loss of 'substance' effected by modernist science, postmodernists take this loss for granted, confront a world of pseudo-substantialised objects, a wasteland of things drained of all inherent value (which is what I mean by 'de-substantialisation'). Marx tried to return thought to value (and substantiality) by the hypostatisation of 'labour.' Modernist technology, now digitalized, substitutes the robot for the worker and pre-packaged work for 'service'. Postmodernism faces a world in which labour itself has been desubstantialised.

We can see the effects of this postmodernist *forma mentis* in the modern novel, in architecture (Gehry), in theatre, music, and in such human sciences as sociology, anthropology, and political economy. As for history and history-writing, postmodernism manifests itself in various 'eccentric' or non-normative activities such as 'queerhistory,' post-colonial and subaltern studies, and eco-, big data-, and deep-historiography. But such movements gain little traction among professional

historians insofar as both the content and the form of canonical historiography are constituted precisely to resist such deviancies. A postmodern historiography must begin not by treating its referent (the past, 'the 17th century', feudalism, the Renaissance, and so on) as given a priori but as constructions, the social functions of which, at the time of their invention as historiological objects, was to provide genealogical confirmation of 'the present' as 'the way things ought to be.'

A.S.: You seem to be privileging modernism as a literary mode, yet you are skeptical about the ironic mode to which it corresponds. Can the contemporary still be described in terms of modernism?

H.W.: Modernism, postmodernism, contemporary—these terms, like all proper names, are protocol terms.

A.S.: Your formalist perspective on historical thinking and your (post-)structuralist theoretical sympathies are uniquely combined with humanism. How does ethics come into your work? And how do you stand in relation to recent controversies about the nature of humanity itself?

H.W.: Humanism. The older I become, the more I think about this term. I am more inclined towards what Donna Haraway and others call 'inter-species' relations, between, say, humans and animals such as dogs, horses, and chickens. All forms of humanism end up being a kind of species-narcissism justifying the commodification of the whole of nature and its consumption.

A.S.: There are resonances of the Vichan philosophy of universal history in your 'poetics of history,' the typology of rhetorical tropes corresponding to stages of historical consciousness and periods. However, how do you conceptualise the movement of history?

H.W. 'History' cannot be conceptualised in the sense of finding or discovering the 'substance' of human evolution on the planet earth. Of course, one can *stipulate* what one means by 'History' but this runs counter to the empiricist ideology that serves as orthodoxy for modern professional historians. Stipulation of meaning for basic terms in a historiography is what engenders 'grand narratives' of the kind that postmodernists, according to Lyotard, must eschew. 'The movement of history' is a metaphorical expression requiring the naming of the substance of this thing called 'history' that is supposed to be capable of 'movement.' Once you hypostatise 'history' you can present it as capable of all kinds of movements, including actions or intention-motivated movement. You can then proceed to chart a 'pathway' for

this movement, posit an end, aim, or purpose of its 'journey,' and so on. Benjamin speaks of history coming to a 'standstill,' does he not? Of course, we don't have to be literalists in all this. We can stay within the metaphorical, which Spengler did in *The Decline of the West*. Rather than a conception of history as movement, we might speak of figures of history (as aforementioned, the title of a recent book by Jacques Rancière) and schemata of movement. Then you have allegory. Allegories of history —is that not what postmodernist novelists are all about? Try reading Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, this way.