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Interview with Hayden White

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What is the nature of historical writing? Is there a radical opposition between fictional and historical narratives? Are historical narratives more similar to those narratives found in the sciences, or to those verbal fictions found in literature? Since the publication of *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), and continuing with the essays collected in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978) and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987), Hayden White has been exploring these issues in a stimulating and provocative way. His work has had a very polarized reception: some have applauded him for giving a solid basis for rethinking the relationship between history and its narrative representation; and others have criticized him for daring to suggest that history is only, as the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb puts it, "a fictional, rhetorical, literary, aesthetic creation of the historian." In the field of Latin American literary studies, some of his ideas have proven fertile ground for critics such as Rolena Adorno and Doris Sommer.

Hayden White is professor of "The History of Consciousness" and Presidential Professor of Historical Studies at the University of California-Santa Cruz. On April 12, 1995, I went to Santa Cruz to interview him. What follows is an edited version of the interview.

* * *

Question: Let's start with a simple question: what, for you, is a "fact"?

Hayden White: A "fact" is a linguistic statement, a purely linguistic phenomenon. It is a kind of utterance that has the aim of

transforming an event into a possible object of knowledge. I make a distinction between "events" and "facts." You do not find "facts" in reality. The distinction between the notion of an "event," the nature of which we do not know, and the attempt to establish the nature of that event, and produce, therefore, a factual account of what it is, becomes blurred in most historical discourse, especially in the nineteenth century.

Question: Even today, historians talk about studying the "facts."

Hayden White: Yes. Going out and getting the "facts," collecting the "facts" rather than constructing them. I have a more constructionist notion, which I think is more consistent with modern science. A "fact" is an event under a description. What the event is is what the description, the inquiry, is going to determine, and produce, thereby, the "fact." The "fact" is a statement about the event.

Question: So, when speaking about events, it would be unavoidable to fictionalize them.

Hayden White: In the sense that "fictionalization" means to impose upon them a representation, which you then use as the basis. You have the events; you must describe them before proceeding to an analysis of them that would lead to the establishment of their nature, and therefore their factuality. So, insofar as there can be no event construed as a fact without description (verbal, or in the form of images of the event), "fictionalization," in its broad sense, is going on all the time. By "fictionalization" I mean the provision of a description that transforms an event into a possible object of analysis.

Question: Beginning with *Metahistory*, your

work has made a profound impact in historical and literary studies. How do you view *Metahistory* today?

Hayden White: *Metahistory* is twenty-five years old, it is a book of a different historical moment. I am a relativist, so I see it within the context of its time, the concerns of those times. The book has many flaws, many inconsistencies, even a few factual errors. It is a book of the structuralist moment; the effort was to try to do a structural analysis of nineteenth-century historical discourse. I was trying to find out what was the kind of shared basis of these different discourses within this newly-defined field of historical study, [which was] claiming to be a kind of science. At that time, structuralism offered the most efficient theory of discourse, so I applied structuralist principles to history. The twist is that people think of history as the antithesis of structural analysis; so, in turning structuralist discourse theory onto historical discourse, [I] effected a reversal of some kind.

Question: But you still consider yourself a structuralist.

Hayden White: Yes. But I do not regard it as a universally valid form of inquiry. It is one form of analysis of discourse among others. It is true that it does not capture some of the more interesting aspects of discourses—the places where the speaker of the discourse loses control, or contradicts himself or herself and is unable to perceive that. Derrida and de Man were especially good at catching the discourse as it betrays itself, as it subverts itself. I am interested in that, but I think that that determination can only take place against a prior structural analysis. Only against the determination of the dominant structure of the discourse can you see the ways in which the discourse swerves away, in some sense betrays its own subjectivity.

Question: Do you think that we have moved away too quickly from structuralism to post-structuralism?

Hayden White: In the humanities there is always a conventional hostility to structuralism, just as there is a hostility to “system” in general. The humanities operate under the myth of the creative genius, spontaneous inventiveness, and so forth. There is always a tendency to deride anything that smacks of “system,” or “systematicity,” that seems incapable of grasping vital or spiritual processes. I do not think it is ever possible for any discipline that aspires to the status of a science, however broadly construed, to abandon structuralism. If you do that, you are in anarchy, chaos. And indeed, even chaos theory in physics requires a conception of structure in order to determine what will constitute an antithesis to it.

What structuralism offers to the humanities and the social sciences, and in this post-structuralism coincides with it, is the notion of codification. The way in which structures of meaning are produced by a clustering of codes, the way that Barthes demonstrates in *S/Z*. You get the production-of-a-meaning effect when you get two codes or more inhabiting a similar semantic space. Even deconstruction and post-structuralism require a concept of code, or metalanguage (the metalinguistic function is the coding function); what it does, then, is talk about the interferences, the disruptions in the seamlessness of the apparent coding function.

Question: Of all the critics that you quote, you seem to be particularly fascinated by Roland Barthes.

Hayden White: Yes. I think Barthes was the most inventive theorist of criticism and reading. I think the humanities are ultimately about reading. We are not well-trained to teach people how to write; we teach people how to read. It is up to us to develop as many techniques as possible. The challenge today is to see to what extent visual, electronic imagery, and so forth can be brought under the regimes of reading. That was Barthes' whole approach to criticism:

how do you get more effective, more precise, more responsible techniques of reading?

Question: From *Metahistory* to the essays collected in *The Content of the Form*, it seems that you shift your concerns from historical discourse in particular, to narrative in general, narrative as a transcultural way of making sense of the world.

Hayden White: I am very much interested in the theory of narrative in general: myths, literary fictions, things of that sort; in fact, even the uses of narrative in philosophical and social science discourses. Yesterday, I read a story in *Newsweek* about an Australian psychiatrist who has invented "narrative therapy," on the basis of a theory developed by Roy Schaeffer fifteen years ago. It is interesting to think that psychoanalysis, which was called the "talking cure," now becomes not only the talk: now you have to perform a narrative.

I am really interested in the way meaning is produced. Affect and cognition always come hand-in-hand, to provide not only information but a certain affective set towards that information. That is why I study rhetoric.

Question: How would you be able to tell the story of your life without narrativizing it?

Hayden White: If you did, it would be a very strange story . . . Actually, it has been done. Sartre's *Les mots* resists narrativity. He limits himself to talking about the first six or seven years of his life. He says "that's all you need to know." A structure is put into place; that is all you need to know. It is de-narrativized. Kafka's stories also tend towards de-narrativization. Kafka has got a sense of the evaporation of the interiority. Narrative is absolutely necessary for anyone who sees a life as a process of interchange between some interiority and some external manifestation of that interiority. Insofar as the modern self begins to lose a sense of its own depth, it tends to lose narrative coherence.

The efforts at de-narrativization oftentimes are products of scientists telling the stories of their lives. Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table* is a good example.

Question: For you, historical discourse and narrativity are very related.

Hayden White: Narrative coherence makes possible the entertainment of a domain of experience in which real events actually have the forms of stories. The events are organized by the storyteller. A historical event, the philosopher Louis Mink always insisted on, is an event capable of being described in such a way that it can be an element of a story. What you will decide is an "event" is determined by whether it can be put into a story or not.

Question: What would the consequences be of projects such as Oliver Stone's "J.F.K.," in which fiction is freely mixed with real historical events?

Hayden White: Everyone does that. You cannot tell stories of real events without mixing in some forms of fiction. In the case of Stone, what offended so many people was that Stone did openly what everybody else does and disclaims doing. Quite openly, he says: "I am telling a true story. I can only do it by inventing some scenes." By the way, I do not think that "J.F.K." is a good movie. "Schindler's List" is a very good movie. These, of course, are Hollywood commercial films; whatever pretensions to art they can make, the important point is the difference between a great representation of the past, that utilizes fiction and mixes it with fact, and a mediocre one. The great historical representations that openly mix fact with fiction are the kind of thing that you get in the great nineteenth-century novelists: Stendhal, Balzac, Manzoni, even in Walter Scott, who no one reads anymore.

Question: The idea that you have of mid-nineteenth-century France comes from a historian like Michelet, or a novelist like Flaubert?

Hayden White: From both. But Flaubert

is not trying to give the history effect; he is trying to give something much more like a sociology effect in a work like *Madame Bovary*. He consciously wants to suppress the narrative in order to give this clinical diagnosis effect. But it is a kind of history, too; it anticipates the Annals school of history. Flaubert is also interested in treating the present as history, as sustaining the impact of historic forces in a discrete time period, whereas Michelet is fascinated by the past, he carries the present back to the past.

Question: I always thought of the future as the place where we project our fears and desires. You seem to think that the past is also a place where we project those fears and desires.

Hayden White: Every culture is interested in the past in some way, but the fetishizing of the past is distinctively Western European, or, you know, from Greece. We have to account for the fascination with the past, for the kind of value that is attributed to the knowledge of the past—so much so, that a profession has been set up to study the past. The interesting question is: how do you make the past desirable?—so desirable that some people would actually come to be antiquarians, would come to value anything that is old over anything that is new.

You see very different kinds of fascination with the past. It could be a pseudo-scientific one, like Braudel or the Annals historians. Or a clinical one, like Flaubert, analyzing the absurdities of provincial life in the age of industrialization.

Question: Your work has been very influential in the field of Latin American literary studies, specially in Colonial literary studies, where we have a canon almost totally made up of works originally considered as historiographical documents: Colón, Cortés, Bernal Díaz, to name a few.

Hayden White: It is only as a result of the nineteenth century that the literary imagination and a kind of interest in the facts of

real life were regarded in some sense as against one another. Right until the eighteenth century historical discourse was regarded as a mode of discourse, as a mode of writing utilizing particular kinds of information but always continuous with the literary interest or program. You have to ask yourself what is the status of this rigid division between the literary and the historical that begins most effectively with Ranke, and becomes a kind of dogma right on down to the present. This is the result of the effort of history to appear to be an "objective" science, as if objectivity were in some sense not to be found in literary writing. That seems to me a mistake. I believe that modernism, and the kind of writing that Flaubert does, can lay a claim to objectivity that, if anything, is even stronger than what most historians of the nineteenth century produced.

Question: Do you think that your work, or Michel de Certeau's, have made an impact in people writing history today?

Hayden White: Not much. If historians are going to continue to lay claim to be some kind of objective discipline, they have to block out a certain awareness of their own conditions of production. That is what de Certeau says: since its foundation as a kind of science or discipline in the nineteenth century, history has always cultivated a certain kind of repression that is necessary to do its work.

Question: What are you currently interested in?

Hayden White: I am interested in the decadence of social theory. Sociology is pretty much washed up today because it has lost its object: no one knows where to find society anymore. Anthropology? You are going to study culture, right? But where is culture? And who can believe in Economics as a science? The social sciences are in a state of very fertile decay. That is why the anthropologists are going through this soul-searching period. All of them are writing

their memoirs, their confessions... We are at a very interesting moment in which all of the disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences have to be reinvented, reconceptualized, in the light of a genuine globalization: population growth, transformation of the environment, all these things. So, I think that it is a good time to look upon the paradigms that are being dismantled.

Question: The last question: which writers, or narratives, move you?

Hayden White: The historian I really admired most was de Certeau. He was a really great historian, especially his last book, *The Mystic Fable*. My model of great historical writing was Huizinga. But I do not read much history now. I am not much interested in philosophy either, as I once was. I am interested in the problematization of discourse. I have returned recently to the reading of the great modernists: Eliot, Joyce, Proust, Woolf. I regard their experiments with voice, and their attitude towards writ-

ing, as revolutionary: something that has made possible a whole different take on the nature of culture, the nature of the past. Walter Benjamin still fascinates me, especially his earlier work. I think Derrida is a great writer, although I can't keep up: he writes too quickly for me. I like novelists such as Robert Coover and Don DeLillo, whose book about Lee Harvey Oswald, *Libra*, is very sophisticated in its fusion of fiction and fact. I can't get enough of Borges: I reread him all the time. I used to be interested in Octavio Paz, but not anymore. I recently started reading more and more of the Boom novelists, like Vargas Llosa; I like them because they problematize history, although I am not much interested in Fuentes. There is something old-fashioned about him, even though he is always up-to-date. I also like some Brazilian sociologists and philosophers, like Luiz Costa-Lima, who deal with this question of, as they put it, how to be modern in the tropics.