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I AM NOT INTERESTED IN TRUTH. I AM INTERESTED IN REALITY. A CONVERSATION WITH HAYDEN WHITE

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Jakub Muchowski, "Nie interesuje mnie prawda. Interesuje mnie rzeczywistość — rozmowa z Haydenem Whitem", *Historyka*, XLI, 2011, pp. 167–174.

ABSTRACT

The conversation concerns major questions in the theory of historical writing, both raised or elaborated in Hayden White's work. It focuses on the relation between history and its closest others: science and literature, as well as the issue of the function of historical studies. Conversation includes the discussion of the concepts of fiction, figure, fulfillment, figurative and conceptual language, modernism.

Key words: Hayden White, theory of history, fiction, modernism, historical writing.

Słowa kluczowe: Hayden White, teoria historii, fikcja, modernizm, pisarstwo historyczne.

Jakub Muchowski: Thank you for accepting my invitation. I would like to ask you a few questions about your book which was recently published in Poland.¹ In the preface to the volume you underscored that when you use a term 'fiction', you follow its definition provided by Bentham. I wonder whether one can relate this comment to your previous writings on fiction in historiography?

Hayden White: Most people understand that the concept of fiction has two different meanings. In philosophy and in law fiction is just a hypothetical construction. In law we have the fiction of corporation. It is called a legal fiction. Although it is a fiction, it is real.

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¹ H. White, *Proza historyczna* [Historical Prose], E. Domańska (ed.), Krakow 2009

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Bentham's idea is that any hypothesis is a fictio. Roman fictio denotes an invention, a hypothetical possibility. Another meaning is 'something fantastic', 'an imaginary thing'. But the imaginary can be both a hypothesis and a product of poetic imagination which puts together images to create monsters.

When I was using the notion of fiction I was trying to include all of those meanings. For most historians when you say 'literature' you mean 'fiction'. I want to suggest that the literary writing may not be about imaginary entities, but about the real things. History is about the real world, not an imaginary world and it can be presented in the artistic way without turning the historical writing into imaginary.

In other words, I think that postmodernists have as their subject matter historical reality, but they are not fictionalizing it, they are not turning it into a fantastical universum. Postmodernists are giving literary artistic treatment to real events. The example of this is Primo Levi, the writer who transformed a testimony into a work of art. It is about the real world but it is treated artistically. In modernist prose you have artistic writing about real things and you have artistic writing about imaginary things.

JM: And what about historical writing?

HW: I think that some of historical writing is literary, and some is fictional. I have a piece on Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.² I claim there that Tolstoy suggested that all historical writing is fictional in the sense that you never have enough information to be sure that facts are available. When we want to get to the past we have to use literary techniques as substitutes for the facts.

JM: Frank Ankersmit in his *Historical Representation*³ wrote that the theory of literature is a proper instrument for analysis of historical writing, but it should not be applied to the theory of history. His main argument was that the theory of literature has nothing relevant to say about the relation between the language and the reality but focuses on the language itself. Could you comment on this statement?

HW: There is an ambiguity in the notion of literature defined as speech or discourse which 'focuses on the language itself'. The type of speech

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² H. White, "Against Historical Realism. A Reading of «War and Peace»", *New Left Review*, vol. 46, July–August 2007, pp. 89–100.

³ F. Ankersmit, "Linguistic Turn: Literary Theory and Historical Theory", in: F.R. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2001, pp. 29–74.

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which focuses on the language in which it is written is usually what is understood in Roman Jakobson's notion of language in its poetic function.⁴ Poetic discourse draws attention through its featuring of modeling techniques (like repetition, rhyme, rhythm, meter, assonance, dissonance, etc.) to its own constructedness – while prose typically focuses on other speech functions, especially the referentiality. According to Jakobson and the formalists/structuralists in general, all discourse is not only formed but, insofar as it might contain an element of 'focus on its own language', employs the poetic function too. Discourse operates through different kinds of patterning, for example, in narrative, the use of emplotment technique. Ankersmit forgets or has overlooked the fact that language is also in the world and can itself be a referent of a speech or discourse, and typically is in artistic prose, of which historical writing is an instance.

JM: When discussing the relation between literature and history, you always emphasized the cognitive aspect of literature, the insight it gives us into the reality. Could you characterize this function of literary writing?

HW: I would not usually use the term 'literature' as a collective noun designating a variety of works characterized by their 'literariness'. However, literary writing, unlike non-literary or utilitarian writing (written in the mode of instruction, how to do something, command, or naïve description), features the poetic function and the metalinguistic function in its articulation. This means that it will always be examining and experimenting with the relation between speech or language and its relation to the rest of the world. While it is true that language originates in mind, consciousness, or the brain, it enters the real world of human affairs as speech, writing, and symbolization where it is subject to attempts to control, censor, or 'domesticate' its original 'wildness' (sometimes confused with metaphor and figuration). I regard literary writing as a paradigm of cultural productivity in general. This is why I am always suspicious of any theory of language which seeks to naturalize it. Culture is obviously grounded in nature. What distinguishes it are the ways in which culture manages to create a domain of its own, a domain of human action and passion. This domain is related to nature in innumerable ways and at the same time seeks to distinguish itself from nature by the creation of anti-natural rules and regulations, such as

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⁴ See: H. White, "Figuring the Nature of the Times Deceased": Literary Theory and Historical Writing", in: Ralph Cohen (ed.), *The Future of Literary Theory*, Routledge: New York–London 1989, pp. 19–43.

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the incest tabu, kinship systems, systems of exchange, production, and consumption, whole canons of laws and regulation for everything from sex to, yes, proper uses of language itself.

JM: In your recent texts you developed a concept of figure borrowed from Erich Auerbach. You use it to describe the practice of historian in which he relates one event to another. You used this term before in many different meanings to discuss crucial issues of the theory of historiography. Why is this term important in the theoretical reflection on history?

HW: Just to give an example: a historian writing about Napoleon in a narrative has to turn the real Napoleon into the figure in order to place it in the narrative. Only figures can have a function in the narrative. Real people can't.

This is why you can have narratives about animals. You can take a wolf or pig; Spigelman does this in *Maus*.⁵ In Spigelman's comics a mouse is a figure of the Jew. He needs this in order to narrativize his story.

The important thing about stories in which real people are the agents or the protagonists, is that they have to be described and transformed into figures in order to serve as characters in story. You have to describe Napoleon as having the attributes of a character, so that he can be the a part of the story. If you want to reject the common narrative when dealing with Napoleon, you have to disfigure the received treatments of the Napoleon type. That would be an example of disfiguration.

JM: What about the notions of the prefiguration and the fulfillment?

HW: The notions of the prefiguration and the fulfillment Auerbach took from Dante. Actually Auerbach got this idea from Hegel.⁶ This is a Christian concept made upon the idea of the relationship of the Old and the New Testament as including prefigurations; for example, Adam as the prefiguration of Christ. It is a way of narrativizing changes without using concepts.

JM: What is the relationship between the concept and the figure?

HW: When you conceptualize persons you turn them into stereotypes. The figure is antistereotyping. Philosophers and formal logicians always look for the concept in the figure, while poets resist the concept. When you

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⁵ A. Spiegelman, *Maus. A Survivor's Tale*, vol. 1–2, Pantheon Books: New York 1986.

⁶ H. White, "Kosmos, Chaos und Reihenfolge in her historiologischen Darstellung", in: Evelin Schultz, Wolfgang Sonne (Hrsg.), *Kontinuität und Wandel: Geschichtsbilder in verschiedenen Fächern und Kulturen*, Zürich: Züricher Hochschulforum, Bde. 28, 1999.

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conceptualize someone, when you say, 'Oh! That's the Napoleon type!' you stereotype them. You turn them into the concept, whereas the figure richly articulates the individuality.

For example, in the novel you can have stereotypes and you can have figures. All of them can participate in the novel. Some characters in the novel are stereotypes. They represent concrete concepts. The conflict between concept and the figure is identical with the great difference between logical thinking and figurative thinking. Figurative thinking is thinking in terms of images. Logical thinking is thinking in terms of concepts.

Modern linguistics think that behind every figure there is a concept. I don't think so. I think a poetic utterance resist transformation of figures into concepts. Figures are necessary to create an individual. That's the main difference between the poetic utterance and the philosophical one.

Figurative thinking is visionary because every fulfilled figure is itself a prefiguration of something. Hegel discussed that in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Any achieved individual, entity, already contains the seeds, expectations. Koselleck calls this *Erwartungshorizont*. Expectation is not the same as prediction. Expectation is an act of imagination about what is possible in the future, not what is probable, not even what is necessary. The figurative thinking is a possibilist's thinking.

JM: Traditionally three main functions were ascribed to history: it gave us knowledge about the past, it taught us how to live, it allowed us to foresee the future. Now all three appear to be unjustified pretence. What is then the function of history for Hayden White?

HW: I need the past because I need to refer to it in order to imagine the ways of my current situation. How did I come to this situation, what can I do with it? What should I do? History does not provide you with any answers to that, it provides you with practice in situational thinking, though. The situation is a time and place that requires you to make a decision. For example, this morning I was in a number of situations that didn't require any decision on my part. But I can find myself in situation that demands that I make a decision or a judgement.

I have to make a decision but I never have enough knowledge. However, history shows us a different kind of situations. So I think what history does, what it can deal with, is that it can teach you to think situationally. History can give you practice but it can never tell you what you should do in your own situation.

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JM: Discussing what you called the ‘old question’ (is history art or science)⁷, you made an interesting remark that the issue was formulated in the 19th century and since then definitions of both, art and science, have changed.

HW: This is an example of what I would call a historical inertia. There are specific notions what science means and there are specific notions what art means. They continue to develop, but historians keep thinking about science and art in 19th-century terms. So they think, for example, that the conflict is between the positive science and the romantic art. Romanticism is the thing of the past as is the positivism. Therefore, when you ask the question: is the history science, art or a mixture of that two? Do you mean modern art? Modern science? Post-Newtonian science? To think of history as a science in the age of Einstein’s relativity is different then, to see history as a science in the age of Boyle, and the steam engine, and Newton. So, too, for art. No modern artist is still thinking of art in the way the romantic artists did.

JM: Is there a new model of science that history could fit?

HW: Sure. There is catastrophe theory. Chaos theory. Crystallography. You know the crystals grow and one can’t predict from a given stage of growing what the next stage will be. Even though you can do a physical or chemical analysis of crystals development. There is Darwinian evolutionary theory...

I think most historians have exactly the same idea of science as Aristotle. Common sense is really kind of Aristotelian. Moreover, most historians think of causation like Aristotle did: primary cause, material cause, efficient cause and final cause. But no scientist thinks that way. Aristotle’s biology is based on the concept of natural cycles, it is teleological. Modern history can’t be both scientific and teleological.

JM: How would you call the main subject of your theoretical reflection? Would it be the theory of history, philosophy of history, historical discourse or just historical writing?

HW: Well, increasingly, I say that I work in discourse analysis. I do not, however, define different discourses by their putative referents. For example, I would not follow Aristotle’s idea that history is about the actual (or the actualized) and poetry is about the possible. Or the idea that history is

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⁷ H. White, “An Old Question Raised Again: Is Historiography Art or Science? (Response to Iggers)”, *Rethinking History*, vol. 4, no 3, December 2000, pp. 391–406.

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about the real past and fiction about an imaginary non-reality. Rather, using Jakobson's idea that different kinds of speech or language events operate a variety of functions and devices (Jakobson speaks of expressive function, referential function, poetic function, phatic function, metalinguistic function, and affective or conative function — this is in his famous essay "Closing Statement"), the referent or putative manifest referent is only one element of a discourse. To be sure, historiography tends to feature its referent (past reality) as its dominant, not to say obsessive, concern, but when it comes to actually writing an account of what one has found in the archives, the other functions of speech/language are brought into play. Especially when it is a matter of telling a story or telling the story of the past. Stories do not spring out of reality already fully fashioned. They have to be invented by writers or speakers.

JM: Are you a modernist or a postmodernist? Sometimes you call yourself a modernist and sometimes a postmodernist, while your commentators always call you a postmodernist. Who are you?

HW: I'm kind of stuck in the modernism. For me, in my lifetime, modernism was a traumatic experience. When I was a young man I was thought in schools the 19th century's ideas of art and science. I was thought to read romantic poets. I read Shelly, Wordsworth, Jane Austen. And then, suddenly, modernism came on stage. T. S. Elliot's poetry, Ezra Pound's poetry, Mallarmé. Proust's novel looked very strange to me, so I had to learn a completely different idiom. It took a lot of time but it was worth it.

Now modernism is a tradition. So I became a traditionalist. I still prefer Proust to Andy Warhol. But I read postmodernist literature and I really like postmodernist art. And what do you think?

JM: I think that modernism is a very complex cultural movement and it embraces postmodernism. In short words, postmodernism is a late form of modernism.

HW: I agree. Postmodernism is a further extension of modernism. Here I agree with Frederic Jameson. Jameson said that postmodernism is a later development of modernism. These are different generations of modernist. The concept of postmodernism first emerged in architecture, and it was against the modernist movement in architecture, the international style and Bauhaus. So you can call it postmodernist so far as it is a rebellion of younger architects against their elders. So too in the novel, so too in the poetry, so too in the art.

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JM: Many times you called yourself a formalist. Does it have anything to do with American formalism, the New Criticism?

HW: No. Actually I think that New Criticism is formalism but a very limited one.

JM: So you are closer to structuralism?

HW: Yes, I claim that you cannot think without structures. But remember – structuralism is primarily about concepts. Poststructuralism is about figures. That is why Derrida, Paul de Man, and others supplement structuralists insights.

JM: Speaking of Paul de Man. Were you inspired by his work?

HW: I have a great admiration for Paul de Man. He taught me that rhetoric is not only about persuasion — rhetoric is the science of figurative language. Some scholars see rhetoric as persuasion, while he sees rhetoric as a theory of tropology. I think he is right.

Rhetoric is the way one endows a fact with meaning. We want to know not only what happened, what are the facts, but also what do they mean. Meaning is produced in representation, in language. Meaning is not in things. Meaning is not even in words. Meaning is in combination of words, which are treated as images, figures, signs. Rhetoric explains how they can be combined in nonlogical configurations that are still meaningful. It provides us with semantic conceptions of the truthful, as against the logical, syntactical, grammatical.

De Man was always talking about the relationship between the grammatical level on which discourse unfolds, and the rhetorical level. For him they were organic, because you cannot have rhetorical without grammatical and grammatical without rhetorical. Therefore the tension of the text is the interplay of those two. In many respects that is the way of thinking about the relationship between the concepts and the figures.

JM: You often indicated your admiration for pragmatic philosophy. What about pragmatic theory of literature, for example Stanley Fish's work?

HW: No. Stanley Fish is a very brilliant rhetorical analyst of the discourse but he is interested in the rhetoric as an argument. He is interested in the rhetoric as a way to understand how to win an argument. I am not interested in winning arguments. I am not even interested in truth. I am interested in reality. John Dewey, Pierce, and Richard Rorty are closer to me.

I also think that Vico was a pragmatist. Rhetoric is primarily practical. The word 'practice' comes from praxis which means an action, an act. This comes back to the question: what should I do? There is no rule to tell me

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what I should do. I have to learn to think situationally and rhetoric helps me to understand that better than logic. Logic is fine as an instrument assessing the coherence or the arguments cast in concepts, but it does not help me to get through the day.

JM: What is the difference between looking for truth and looking for reality?

HW: Truth does not help you get through the day. Truth is always abstract. You can go around with all kinds of truthful information, but they do not help you in any given situation. Every new situation requires new kind of situationally relevant knowledge. I learn to think in the place, not in the abstract.

JM: Thank you for the conversation.

HW: My pleasure.

Krakow, February 16, 2010