

3

Introduction to Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse*

The theory of the discipline of history asks about the conditions of possible history. Two smaller questions are always contained in this question. What are the empirically verifiable conditions that have made possible and are making possible actually occurring history in its temporal extensions? This question aims at facts. The other question is directed toward the linguistic work undertaken by historians when they formulate and seek to answer questions of fact. In what ways do historians constitute their history (*Geschichte*) when they fix it, orally or in writing, and offer it to a circle of listeners or readers? In both cases—but from different perspectives—the questions concern the mediation of being and saying, happening and recounting, *Geschichte* and *Historie*.

During the last decades, the debate over theory within the historical profession has surely placed the emphasis more on the first—factual—question. This is understandable from the internal perspective of the discipline, for what could be more obvious for an academic institution than securing the general rules by which it marks out, competently and appropriately, its subject? Whatever the political occasions or ideological intentions that in the past provoked debate over theory in the discipline of history, its result has been disillusionment. No serious dispute can be aroused anymore over the idea that every narrated story (*erzählte Geschichte*), just like every explanatory, justifying, and thus represented history (*dargestellte Geschichte*), is implicitly or explicitly interwoven with or guided by theoretical premises.

Not the possibility but rather the kinds and applications of theory are in dispute. Accordingly, in Germany the debate over theory has primarily taken place in the medium of historical safeguarding in order to maintain or substantiate positions that have proven themselves in the context of previous research. We need only to think of names like Droysen and Jacob Burckhardt, Dilthey and Nietzsche, Marx and Max Weber, Simmel and Troeltsch to indicate the extent to which historicism, despite all the criticism, has still not been fundamentally left behind. The debates, given comparatively scant reception in the West, treated the writing of history (*Historie*), in terms of disciplinary theory, as just a special case. The same is true for the excitement that Hempel and Oppenheimer's all-embracing explanatory model triggered, and it is also true for the numerous effects that the work of analytic philosophy of language has had on all textual studies. Finally, the same holds true for the different tendencies of French structuralism, whether articulated in linguistic, anthropological, or even historical terms. In this context, the twelve essays that Hayden White offers us provide an auspicious point of entry from which to more intensively resume our disciplinary and theoretical disputes with Western positions.

Hayden White's primary interest is not the discipline of history (*Geschichtswissenschaft*) as a research discipline with its own methodology, nor is it primarily the writing of history (*Historie*) as a literary genre. Hayden White takes a step back, as it were, both chronologically and factually: chronologically back to rhetoric as an old grammar encompassing all types of texts and as an art of appropriating the world through language. Factually, White considers historical texts primarily as *texts*, regardless of their scholarly or artistic achievements. He investigates the linguistic constitution of human experience as such, insofar as it is reflected in all areas of the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*), as opposed, in German terminology, to the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*). Hayden White's investigations primarily thematize works of historical theory and representation, but his approach reaches much further. He asks how the cultural treatment of historical experience is linguistically made possible at all. In this respect, his claim moves into proximity with Gadamer, for whom historicity (*Historik*) is an ancillary case of general hermeneutics. And he also proceeds similarly to Hans Blumenberg, for whom the power of linguistic metaphors discloses experience and precedes all historical statements. Although neither author is referred to by Hayden White, we may nevertheless expect a link here.

By returning the writing of history (*Historie*) once again to its former definition as a part of rhetoric, White first of all gains a new systematic perspective. With regard to the linguistic appropriation of the world, this perspective includes texts of poetry, literature, philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis—as well as texts of history (*Historie*). His own bold premise is that the linguistic conditions of possibility for experiencing the world are tropologically delimited. Investigated since Aristotle, Cicero, or Quintilian, figures of speech, which are in no way rationally imperative or logically cogent, open up horizons of interpretations that, according to Hayden White, reach far beyond syntactical figures. No matter what kinds of texts are in question, behind them, White argues, there are always prior tropological decisions. These concern regularities of linguistic articulation that at once open up as well as restrict patterns of interpretation in all imaginable historical situations, time and again, consciously or not, in a more or less encoded way. Hayden White turns the attention of his readers here, to where, according to him, key decisions occur. For example, he poses the question: Into what parts do historians split their subject matter, and which parts do they relate, and in what way, to each other? Or, he asks: How do parts relate to the whole, which parts are singled out as representative, or what is separated out, and in what way, in order to be able to be compared? Or he asks: How are temporal continuities and discontinuities established? All these preliminary questions arising in theory are tested by White in terms of the linguistic decisions out of which they arose. Knowingly or not, linguistic options always thus stand behind theoretical decisions. It is the pictorial nature of the figures of expression that prejudgets supposedly pure theoretical concepts. Within the field of rhetoric, these figures can be traced back to the tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Hayden White does not merely scrutinize individual linguistic passages in order to track down such tropes; rather, he discerns patterns of interpretation in the prior tropological decisions that impregnate the entire text. This is valid regardless of the open question of whether language is implemented only instrumentally with regard to the author's intentions, or whether figures of language already unconsciously fix the possibility of thinking these intentions.

It is obvious that with this approach, the writing of history (*Historie*) moves together with all such texts concerning the transformation of experience into sense. And it is also obvious that, with this, the old Aristotelian division between history, poetry, and philosophy becomes invalid, or at least

subject to scrutiny. Thus the frequent proposals to find a place for history between art and science reveal themselves as a spurious problem. Instead, in the fashion of the rhetorical tradition, White interrogates the historians, or to be more precise, their texts, as to how they can socially mediate their claim to truth. He does not ask himself the internal disciplinary question of whether historical statements are correct or incorrect, but rather insists that the linguistic achievement of a historical representation must rise to the societal challenge of being good and not bad, understandable and not incomprehensible. A historical statement is only meaningful when it speaks to its addressees in such a way that the otherness of past or foreign experiences can be integrated into their own experience.

In this respect, Hayden White appears to be near Theodor Lessing, who puts a subjective interpretation on the chaos of pre-given facts or data. But precisely here, White has gone a step farther methodologically. He shows how what is tropologically pre-given in a language—its traditional “figures,” similes, and updatable comparisons—finitely delimit the boundless space of possible data. Even the so-called plot, presumably underlying the narrative treatment of a sequence of events, belongs to the conditions of possible mediation that facilitate the task of deriving meaning from historical statements in the first place. In this respect, White leaves the subjectivist interpretation behind in order to investigate the linguistic criteria of objectivization in whose wake the disciplinarity of history can be justified from a linguistic perspective. One of the intentions of White's essays is to achieve this.

Certainly, the objection can be raised that linguistic options, such as how a history (*Geschichte*) should be presented and interpreted, are only consequences of factual considerations formulated by historians in their work as scholars. Questions such as which pre-given historical experiences lead to which sort of theoretical conceptualizations, or which theoretical anticipations, in principle, constitute what kinds of interrelations among events, are resolved within the discipline according to the self-understanding of historians. This also determines what data are considered important at all in the explanation of remote or unexpected findings in order to extend meaning and derive an internally meaningful sense of connection from events. Hayden White is inclined to classify this question as secondary, and he is here both more skeptical of the theoretical claim of historians but also more certain with regard to the linguistic constitution of all representations of his-

tory. He aims at an analysis of, as it were, the normative patterns that possess a linguistically demonstrable status. Historians who refer to their theoretical explications as constitutive of their histories are thus pressed for an additional level of reflection. They are confronted with the question of whether there are not linguistic patterns of interpretation hidden behind their theoretical considerations; they think less about reflecting on these patterns because the execution of the representation itself is all too often classified as secondary by historians, in particular as a consequence of their research. Here, Hayden White steers against the self-understanding of the profession even though he levels many a polemic against a naive realism in historical epistemology, something by which present-day historians should hardly feel affected anymore.

In every case, in good humor and with hearty polemics, Hayden White makes it clear how quickly prior metaphorical decisions lead to the linguistic circle of communication before they have even been justified theoretically and scientifically. Whether a history (*Historie*) is developed causally or functionally, comprehensively or partially, whether it is primarily oriented toward comparisons or more toward individual differences—behind all these formalizable options, there always stands the pre-given, metaphorical potentiality of every linguistic articulation.

As already mentioned, the four linguistic figures that Hayden White examines are not only explanatory patterns for individual sentences but also for entire historical designs. Whether they are holistic or causal, materialistic or idealistic, can already be shown within language before a perspective of criticism of ideology, itself always remaining entangled in the linguistic patterns of interpretation, has to be applied. Thus it can definitely be the case that the theoretical self-assessment or critical perspective of an author in no way corresponds to the linguistic devices and forms of which he makes use.

Hayden White offers a metahistorical pluralism of linguistically facilitated interpretations of the world without thereby sinking into a historicizing relativism and without validating techniques of reduction based on criticism of ideology as final statements. In the end, his basic tenor stems from a humanistically conceived rhetoric, which examines how interpretations of the world can both mediate and facilitate political and ethical decisions.

As such, it becomes explainable why certain historians have been able to reach the status of classics: classics depend on the linguistic evidence with

which historical experiences have been transformed into meaningful statements. Even if individual errors are detectable in the sphere of interpreted facts, historical (*historische*) texts can negotiate historical (*geschichtliche*) truths. Analogous to poetic or philosophical truths, these remain retrievable and worth discussing regardless of their origin and initial conditions.

Secondly, apart from the systematic approach, Hayden White also makes use of diachronic patterns of interpretation; he derives them from the temporal sequence in which figures of speech succeed each other. He is inclined to track down a temporal logic, beginning with the figure of strict metaphor, so as to let the figures of metonymy, followed by synecdoche, and finally, the figure of irony, emerge from it. In this respect, Piaget's developmental model of how children learn to appropriate the world, for example, is interpreted tropologically in the sequence mentioned above as a linguistic acquisition of experience and its enrichment. Even Foucault's periods, intended to be antihistorical, are converted into a meaningful, diachronic schematic order of events. Foucault is decoded as a legitimate heir to Western philosophy of history who, according to White, can under no circumstances only be read in post-historical or poststructuralist terms. And even Thompson's history of the English working class, consciously geared toward purely empirical considerations, is interpreted by White as a sequence testifying to the increasing self-awareness and power of reflection of acting subjects within society. Prudently, Hayden White leaves open the question of to what extent Thompson himself projected a linguistic pattern of interpretation onto the historical stages of the English workers' movement, or (and what would empirically be a harder thesis to argue) whether he in fact empirically confirmed the stages of increasing self-awareness corresponding to the alternating topological figures of speech.

Thus, interpretations of history are not just composed of the free choice between always available linguistic options but are instead subject to a sequential constraint of metaphorical language. This interpretation, made plausible with reference to Vico, definitely adds a historical thesis to the systematic one, which recognizably approaches Hegel. Certainly, the question remains to be answered whether the sequence of social, cultural, and political facts, conflicts, and changes leads to processes in the so-called sphere of subject matter that can be interpreted as analogous to sequential patterns intrinsic to language. To be sure, Hayden White is more cautious here than in his systematizing approach. However the difference between so-called

actual history and its interpretation is determined, the determination of the difference itself can only be made by linguistic means. Whatever the content of the factual theories brought forward by historians, Hayden White offers them a linguistic metatheory. There may still be no science of historiography as a factual genre; however, there is a linguistically justifiable metahistory. In these exaggerated terms, one could outline Hayden White's position. He does not go so far in this respect as the French poststructuralists who want to dispose of the historical (*historische*) text as a historical (*geschichtliche*) mediator of truth. According to Hayden White, the pictorial figures of speech, constituting both intuition and thinking, are finitely limited—the field of what needs to be researched in the domain of history remains open. Hayden White knows how to reformulate forgotten questions into new ones, or how to forge new approaches with old ones.

Translated by Todd Presner