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Acknowledgments, Endorsements, Misgivings: Hayden White in Conversation with the French

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Hayden White's work has been discussed in France since the 1980s, and White himself has made extensive use of French literature, philosophy, and historiography. White, however, was ambivalent toward a certain French style in philosophy and the social sciences. While admiring scholars such as Foucault and Kristeva, he warned that the way the French document their inquiries and write up their materials does not always coincide with Anglo-American standards.

Keywords: Existentialism; *emplotment*; Hayden White; French historiography.

Reconhecimentos, Aprovações e Apreensões: Hayden White em Diálogo com os Franceses

O trabalho de Hayden White tem sido debatido em França desde a década de 1980 e o próprio White recorreu frequentemente à literatura, à filosofia e à historiografia francesa. No entanto, White manteve uma posição ambivalente face a um certo estilo de filosofia e ciências sociais francesas. Admirando estudiosos como Foucault e Kristeva, White sublinhou, ainda assim, que o modo como os franceses documentam e redigem os seus trabalhos nem sempre coincide com os standards anglo-americanos.

Palavras-chave: Existencialismo; *emplotment*; Hayden White; Historiografia Francesa.

Acknowledgments, Endorsements, Misgivings: Hayden White in Conversation with the French

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In the entry “Postmodernisme et histoire” written for *Historiographies*, a two-volume collection of essays edited by the French historians Christian Delacroix, François Dosse, Patrick Garcia, and Nicolas Offenstadt, Hayden White (2010) presents once again some of the theses about history that he views as postmodern—and that also can be regarded as his own. Postmodern theorists, according to White, believe that if the past might be out there in the form of traces, descriptions of it are not. Narratives of past events, therefore, are not found in the evidence; they are constructed by scholars, who recount them in different ways, all equally acceptable from an epistemological (if not always an ethical) standpoint. Such conception of course undermines history’s aim to “get the story right,” as well as it undermines the oppositions between factual and fictional discourse. It leads to a skepticism and relativism that according to White should not be lamented. Indeed, both stands are not specifically postmodern; they have been inherent in a discipline

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that directs its practitioners to be “skeptical” toward their sources, and to make the events that they describe “relative” to their context.¹

This entry, to my knowledge, is the sole text written by White for a French publication, and only the second to appear in a French translation. The first one was the introduction to *Metahistory*, translated by Laurent Ferri and commented upon by David Schreiber and Marc Aymes (2009) in an issue of the journal *Labyrinthe*. According to François Dosse, the editors of *Historiographies* asked White to contribute to their anthology because his work was both unavailable in French and the subject of angry polemics. Their goal was to give exposure to White’s positions in a book aimed at a general audience, and in so doing to help clarify (some of) the terms of the debate surrounding postmodernism and White’s stance toward it.²

Although White’s work had not been translated into French, it had been discussed in France starting in the 1980s. Its main introducer was the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who in the first and third volumes of *Temps et récit* (1983, 1985), then in *La Mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* (2000), granted several pages to detailed analyses of White’s theses. On the historians’ side, it is Roger Chartier (1993) who first asked White “four questions” in the journal *Storia della Storiografia*, questions to which White (1995) replied later in that same journal. Following in Chartier’s footsteps, noted members of the French historical community such as Antoine Prost (1996), Gérard Noiriel (1996), Bernard Lepetit (1999), and —more recently— François Hartog (2013) and Sabina Loriga (2016) have dealt with White’s work in the studies they have written about the state of their discipline. These scholars have generally acknowledged White’s contribution to the philosophy of history, specifically his ascertaining that the data patiently collected by the historian must at some point be written up, and that that writing up must be done according to conventions that history shares at times with literature. Their reser-

1 This essay of course is not the only one in which White describes his stand toward postmodernism. His position is more detailed and explicit in the 1999 essay “Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties.”

2 Email message of François Dosse of April 11, 2018.

vations have born mainly on White's neglect of the implications of the "historical method" on procedures of writing, as well as on the difficulty of applying White's emplotment model to historiographic studies that no longer rely on narrative for their organization. The literary theorist Françoise Lavocat (2016) has also questioned White's periodization of the relations between factual and fictional discourse, maintaining that in seventeenth-century France, for instance, these relations were hotly debated and history was not unanimously regarded, as White believes, as a literary art. While the French historians and theorists, I have just mentioned thoroughly argue the objections they may have about White's theses, some of their colleagues have not always manifested the same scruples. They have attacked White without even referring to specific texts, blaming him for spreading the idea that the gas chambers were "only discourse",³ and congratulating the French historical establishment for having maintained "the principle of the quest for truth as the fundamental intention of the construction of knowledge" (Bédarida).⁴

While the French intellectual community, compared to that in other countries, showed only a limited interest in White and French publishers for a long time failed to have his work translated, White himself, if not a devout francophile, was at least an attentive reader of French literature, philosophy, and history. Before allocating chapters of *Metahistory* (1973) to Michelet and Tocqueville, White, in his important essay "The Burden of History" (1966), had already drawn on French sources to argue his point. Making the historian in Gide's *L'Immoraliste* and Sartre's *La Nausée* into an old-fashioned researcher, disgruntled or overwhelmed by his never-ending task, illustrated his view of the discipline as an unfortunate combination of "mid-nineteenth-century art and late nineteenth-century science." This state of affairs, according to White, forced twentieth-century histori-

3 Ivan Jablonka, *L'Histoire est une littérature contemporaine. Manifeste pour les sciences sociales* (Paris: Seuil, 2014), 109.

4 See François Bédarida, "Postface," in *L'Histoire et le métier d'historien en France, 1945-1995*, ed. François Bédarida (Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1995), 415-422. For a detailed study of White's reception in France, as well as an account of my experience as a translator of White's essays, interviews, and book reviews, see my "Hayden White in/and France: Receptions, Translations, Questions," forthcoming in *Rethinking History*.

ans to make choices. They had to select not only a stance toward the past but appropriate means of representation, means that would no longer be those employed by novelists such as Dickens or Balzac. The way White sees the relations between situation and freedom, in this instance, between circumstances over which historians have no control and the choices that they must acknowledge they are making, has been emphasized by specialists of White such as Hans Kellner (1980), Herman Paul (2011), and Robert Doran (2013). They see in this way of looking at the historical condition an aspect of White's Sartrian "existentialism," that is, of a kind of humanism that distinguishes White from the most extreme forms of Marxian, Freudian, and linguistic determinisms, as well as from the "death of man" aspects of some postmodern theories.

White was to turn to French literature and historiography to make his point in more essays, notably in "The Problem of Style in Realistic representation: Marx and Flaubert"⁵ and "Storytelling: Historical and Ideological"⁶. Analyzing Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale* and Marx's *Le Dix-huit Brumaire de Louis Bonaparte*, White applies his theory of tropes to demonstrate that these two texts, though they clash at the ideological and stylistic levels, still have one thing in common: both are structured on the model of the *Bildungsroman*, as the consciousness of the main characters (Frédéric in *L'Education*, the French bourgeoisie in *Le Dix-huit Brumaire*) move from a "metaphorical" to an "ironic" understanding of the relations they have to reality. Similarly, Braudel's and Barthes's writings on history, as well as Proudhon's study of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's coming to power, are among the texts White makes use of in "Storytelling: Historical and Ideological." Returning to his familiar thesis about the function of emplotment, White shows here how the selection of the archetype of the "epic" shapes Proudhon's conception of Louis-Napoléon's coup—an event that Marx, adopting a different model, makes into a "farce."

5 Hayden White, "The Problem of Style in Realistic Representation: Marx and Flaubert," in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 213-29.

6 Hayden White, "Storytelling: Historical and Ideological," in *Centuries' Ends, Narrative Means*, ed. Seth Leren (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 58-78.

Aware of White's interest in the French intellectual scene, British and American publishers and editors also called on him to contribute to various intellectual endeavors. Thus, he was asked to write the introduction to the translation of Rancière's *The Words of History*;⁷ the entry "Gobineau" in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*;⁸ the article on Foucault in the anthology *Structuralism and Since*;⁹ the section "Romantic Historiography" in *A New History of French Literature*;¹⁰ and especially book reviews. White's important review article of Ricoeur's *Memory, History, Forgetting* is examined in this issue by João Luís Lisboa, and I won't consider it here. But White, over the past forty years, has discussed several other important books written by French scholars, notably Michel Foucault's *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*¹¹ and *History of Sexuality*¹² (I am using the French or the English-language title to indicate which version White is taking up); René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*; Lévi-Strauss's *The Origin of Table Manners* (1980);¹³ Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*;¹⁴ and Julia Kristeva's *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*.¹⁵

For my purpose here, these reviews are in interesting —among many other things— in that they reveal two aspects of least of White's attitude toward what is perceived in the English-speaking world, beyond "French theory," as a certain French way of doing, in this instance, of pre-

7 Hayden White, "Foreword: Rancière's Revisionism," preface to Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), vii-ix.

8 Hayden White, "Gobineau, Comte Arthur Joseph de," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Donald M. Borchert, vol. 4 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), 106-07.

9 Hayden White, "Foucault," in *Structuralism and Since: From Lévi-Strauss to Derrida*, ed. John Sturrock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 81-115.

10 Hayden White, "Romantic Historiography," in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 1823-27.

11 Hayden White, review of *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*, by Michel Foucault, *American Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (1977).

12 Hayden White, "The Archeology of sex," review of *Histoire de la sexualité* by Michel Foucault, *Times Literary Supplement*, May 6, 1977.

13 Hayden White, review of *The Origin of Table Manners*, by Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Annals of Science* 37, no. 2 (1980).

14 Hayden White, review of *The Production of Space*, by Henri Lefebvre, *Design Book Review* 29/30 (1994).

15 Hayden White, review of *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, by Julia Kristeva. *Journal of Modern History* 54, no. 4 (1982).

senting the results of a scholarly investigation. On the one hand, White praises a book like *Surveiller et punir* for being what he calls a brilliant “speculative essay,” that is, a text whose merit is to challenge the categories of traditional historiography by asking new questions and opening new perspectives. Yet White also points out that Foucault’s study, evaluated by the standards of Anglo-American academic discourse, is in many respects lacking: it ignores recent research in the area of penology, and includes neither the index, nor the bibliography, nor the documentary apparatus that could provide information to the historians working in the same field. Similarly, White insists that while Kristeva’s *Desire in Language* does not fall under historical scholarship, it could be read with profit by historians. Indeed, it contains many provocative ideas about language, culture, and society, that is, about domains that should engage specialists in intellectual history. (White stresses that he takes “provocative” in a positive sense, whereas the adjective often signifies “brilliant but hardly solid” in the British and American academic environment.) As he does in his review of Foucault, however, White there feels obliged to warn his fellow historians: Kristeva’s writing habits do not fall under the “plain style” whose employment is the rule in Anglo-American social sciences, and the translation does not always clarify what Kristeva “really means.” For White, in other words, Foucault’s and Kristeva’s works are valuable in that they offer new ways of looking at issues concerning such domains as imprisonment and the relations between desire and bourgeois culture. But they do not, if I interpret White’s caveat correctly, provide instances of the type of scholarly discourse White has been calling for since “The Burden of History”: a discourse that would incorporate techniques of literary modernism, that is, techniques derived from the works of writers such as James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Franz Kafka. To put it differently, White greatly admires the contributions of French scholarship to research in the humanities and the social sciences. On the plane of discourse, however, he does not seem to deem that those contributions can provide a model for the kind of historiography he has been advocating—a historiography that would not just explore new territories, but devise new modes of writing.

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