

White, Hayden. *The Content of the Form: narrative discourse and historical representation*. The John Hopkins University Press, 1992.

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Although the chapters that appear in this book have been previously published separately in different places at different times, they have been revised by the author for their publication as a book and are all related to the problem of historical representation. By putting together essays on Droysen, Foucault, Jameson and Ricoeur, Hayden White has managed to give an encompassing account of a problematic issue that has been one of the major concerns of historical studies as well as of many other areas of the human sciences: that of the importance of narrative representation in the description or explanation of the “object” of study of the human sciences. Although the authors mentioned deal with this subject in different ways, White finds in them common characteristics which confirm the point made by him that historical narratives are, from a semiological perspective, concerned with the production of meanings. Notions such as political power, wars, economic activity and the establishment of alliances interest him to the extent that these discourses involve intentional creation and destruction being, thus, meaningful.

In order to discuss the importance of narrativity in the representation of reality, White reviews the three basic types of historical representation - annals, chronicles and historical narratives, all of them related to the impulse to moralize reality, for they deal with a system of social relationships governed by law. Differently from annals and chronicles, historical narratives have a greater comprehensiveness, a central subject and an organization of materials and also depend on narrativity, an important value due to our need of coherence and fulness in the representation of real events. Since they have a plot and a narrative closure, White suggests that they are also endowed with moral meaning. And as the sequence of events has an “ending”, when the narrative “concludes”, what we have, in fact, is not an end in itself but simply a shift from one moral order to another.

In traditional historical theory, historical discourse followed the dissertative mode of address in the form of the logical demonstration. The dissertation was an interpretation of the historian’s thoughts about

what he supposed were the true events, and his narrative a representation of what he imagined was the true story. This distinction proved to be ambiguous, for what theorists viewed as merely the form of discourse - the narrative - was actually content, because this form manifested itself in elements of stories, in plot: the form of the story performed by human agents determined the form of the narrative, so that the plot would exist prior to the event. The ambiguity of the term "history" rests then in the fact that it refers not only to the facts that actually happened but also to the narration of these very facts. Consequently, White argues that because ideology is the treatment of the form of a thing as a content, historiography in the nineteenth-century must be considered ideological. Or, as Barthes proposes, it can be seen as an imaginary elaboration that allows us to apprehend the structure of the world. The set of real events the historian wants to represent must then be encoded as story elements in an imaginary discourse. By changing the form of the narrative, we might not change the information it conveys but we would surely change the meaning produced by it. Therefore, historical narrative can be characterized as "symbolic discourse" which reveals its form in "plot" and its content in "meaning". Since historical actions are lived narrativizations, they can only be represented by narratives. Hence, form equals content, in the sense that the first is the narrative and the second what has been narrated. Quoting Ricoeur, White states that any discussion of the proper form of a historical narrative becomes a theory of the content of history.

White goes on to Droysen's "Historik", where the same idea of the "content of the form" of a historical discourse can be found. Droysen considers the subject matter as the referent, not the content, which is instead the understanding of the facts and their moral implications. Thus, the same referent, say, the French Revolution, may have different contents. Besides, White argues, if all historical narratives are ideological, and if historical studies presuppose interpretation, a politics of interpretation must also be presupposed, for there is no such thing as "pure" interpretation. Therefore, the wedding of narration and interpretation makes historical studies a discipline rather than a science. Because historical narratives deal in the probable rather than the true, it is not possible to expect historical studies to be impartial. So, instead of being an absolutely objective process, history is foremost a discourse, because it is not a mimetic representation of events but a study of "remains" or "sublimation" of past events.

According to Foucault, in White's account, the basis of all cultural praxis is also discourse, and historical representation, by favoring language, is nothing but discourse, which has as its basis "desire and power", often disguised as "the will to truth". Foucault argues that this discourse is an instrument used to control the body and ultimately society itself. Contrary to the current idea that modern society is not repressive, he affirms when he deals with the discourse of sexuality, for example, that sexual practices have never been so much talked about, studied, and classified, but merely as a means of exerting absolute control over citizens in an attempt to discipline them and punish the ones who deviate from the norm. From his point of view it is the modality of discourse that establishes the distinctions between, say, "natural" and "unnatural" sexual practices, sanity and insanity, truth and error, and so on, so that the individual is conformed to the social laws. Then, to our consciousness, discourse would be reality itself and not simply a representation of it.

White then focuses his analysis on Jameson's view of historical narrative as a "socially symbolic act" that gives meaning to events, with Marx's critical insights being the semantic preconditions for the understanding of cultural texts. The absent cause of present social events, that is, the actions of past human agents, cannot be understood by appeal to reason alone, but, as Jameson states, to the narrative capacities of the imagination, because he believes in the narrativity of the historical process itself. Thus the consciousness of the past would define the present and this process would be exactly the same process of a narrativized sequence of events; in this narratological causation, we can see past human agents as characters in a novel. The notion of contradiction, which is cultural, and therefore absent in nature, is present in a narrative in the dialectical relationship between the plot and story elements. Political problems as well as technical writing problems would be solved in the form of the narrative which, following Hjelt's model, has an expression and a substance just as the content has an expression and a substance.

In discussing Ricoeur's metaphysics of narrativity, White goes against the transformation of historiography into a science, as the Annalists wished, and favors the defense of narrative historiography. Ricoeur's strongest point is his assigning narrativity a capacity to express human

experience of temporality, the enigma of being-in-time. Also important is the distinction he makes between historical events and natural events. To him, historical events possess the same structure as narrative discourse. Therefore, historians can make use of stories to represent them. Ricoeur, like White, is interested in narrative histories that present a plot and also experiences of temporality with meaning (real events as the referent), “invented” by a past agent, and related by the “productive imagination” of the historian. Thus, literary fiction and historiography would both be symbolic discourses sharing a common referent: the human experience of temporality. White goes on to discuss Ricoeur’s notion of “deep temporality”, which involves the mysteries of death and eternity, which are always present whenever human consciousness manifests itself.

Finally, White brings to the fore the question of the context in the text. Because their boundaries and their relationships are not precise, text and context have become an interesting aspect for historians to ponder on, mainly because they raise another problem, the question of transparent and ideologically distorted texts. White surprisingly states that if the historian is equipped with the proper tools, say, linguistic tools, all texts will reveal their praxis and time of production and thus become transparent. The four possible ways language and the world of things are related (causal, mimetic, analogical or semiological) give historians these proper tools and allow different approaches to cultural history. Instead of a linguistic theory of texts that would account for the first three of them, White seems to favor a semiological approach, which would then take into consideration the facts that are external to the events themselves, that is, to contextual facts, that are present as reflections in the text and whose study consists in the process of meaning production. So, the real events are condensed into the form of the historical narrative as a symbol of the sociocultural processes of the time during which it is produced.

In short, what makes Hayden White’s reasoning meaningful is the fact that he makes his point - the one that the form of historical narratives is in fact their content - by taking into account the work of different authors who view the issue from different angles. What is amazing in White’s account is the similarity he finds in novels and historical narratives. In fact, they only differ in the material, or referent, they make use of - real or imaginary events. But they both must take into

consideration the imagination of the novelist and the historian, and here White sides with Ricoeur in the argument that both types of narrative deal with the structures of human time. Whether real or imaginary, events depicted in novels or historical narratives are of a human nature, which gives these narratives a deep philosophical insight.

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