

## The perception of historical imagination after the „*linguistic turn*”

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The major contribution to explore the proper rhetoric resources of historical representation belongs to Hayden White<sup>1</sup>. He is important not only for the questions he has resuscitated, but also for the relevant analysis of this absorbed thinker preoccupied with widening her readers' field of conscience. The debate generated by the author around the literature about Shoab conferred her sentences a dramatic dimension untouched by the theses of French structuralisms. It is not about a contribution to the epistemology of historical knowledge but a poetics having as theme imagination, more precisely historical imagination. This way he expresses her fidelity towards the spirit of time and towards the so-called *linguistic turn*, as long as imagination is perceived in the discourse's structures. So there will be about verbal artefacts. This specification does not diminish the magnitude of the project. Still two obstacles have been removed. The first one is regarding the relationship of history and fiction. Being considered from the point of view of linguistic imagination, historical and fictional stories belong to the same class: “the class of verbal fiction”. All problems related to the referential dimension of the historical discourse shall be analysed starting from this reclassification. The second problem is the distinction between professional historiography and the philosophy of history, or at least that part of historical philosophy that dresses up its great stories at the level of the world. Thus Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, Burckhardt, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Croce are put in the same category. Their common problem is taking into discourse the historical imagination as a form that is related to rhetoric, more precisely to the rhetoric of trope. This verbal form of imagination is the most meddlesome, it is *emplotment*.

In *Metahistory*, the amplitude of the authors' view is manifested in the fact that the procedure of intriguing is realised within a tidy string of typologies that confers to the intercession the aspect of well-articulated taxonomy. But it is never to forget that this taxonomy works at the level of deep imagination structures. The opposition of deep and obvious structure is not ignored by the semioticians, neither by the psychoanalysts. In case of sure verbal fiction it permits the hierarchy of typologies instead of their display and juxtaposition. The four typologies that we will discuss and the structures that result from their association are to be considered as a matrix of the possible combinations on the level of effective historical imagination.

The execution of this program is methodical. The major typology that sets H.White as the follower of Vico – namely the typology of intrigues – offers a hierarchy of three typologies. The first one belongs to the aesthetic perception: it is the *story* dimension of the intrigue. Very similar to the modality of Louis O.Mink, the structure of the story exceeds simple chronology that still prevails in chronicles, and gives the “line” – *story line* – of the history that is a kind of structure in terms of motives that can be called inaugural, transitory or terminal. The main idea is that as it happens in the case of the disciples of narrativism – described above –, *story* has an “explicative effect” only within its structural device's virtue. Rhetoric enters the game for the first time with the epistemology of historical knowledge. The gravity of the conflict is increased by two observations: regarding the form, as it is treated in the last works of H. White, we have to tell that setting into intrigue tends to favour the outlines of history within the detriment of different meanings of the told events, as long as it is emphasised the identification of configuration's class to which an intrigue belongs. Regarding what is believed to precede forming; the rhetorician does not find anything before the narrative sketches with the exception of a non-organised fund – an *unprocessed historical record*. The problem of factual data status regarding the first forming of the told history is open for debate.

The second typology refers mostly to the cognitive aspects of the story. But according to the rhetoric model the notion of argument is considered rather in its persuasive capacity than its proper demonstrative one<sup>2</sup>. The existence of an argumentative modality specific to the narrative and historic discourse and this modality having its own typology represents an original idea, regardless from the

borrowings from other fields of knowledge than history distinction among formal, organistic, mechanic, contextualist arguments<sup>3</sup>.

The third typology – the ideological implications – is mostly related to the modalities of moral and political arguments and so their use in present practice, and this way it clings to what Bernard Lepetit calls the present of history. We will discuss the problem of this typology when we will deal with the implication of protagonists in some events that cannot be separated from their moral charge.

Then follows the intriguing that is considered by H. White the explanatory modality through excellence; H. White borrows the typology with four terms – novelistic, tragic, comic, and satiric – from *Anatomy of Criticism* by Northrop Frye, thus meeting again the rhetoric of Vico.

If we had to characterise with a proper term H. White's intercession, we should talk about – along the author – the theory of style. Every combination of the elements of any kind of typology defines the style of the given work that we could characterise through the dominant category<sup>4</sup>.

We are not discussing the negation of H. White's pioneer work. We could actually regret along R. Chartier the “flunked meeting” among Hayden White, Paul Veyne and Michel Foucault, its contemporaries in the sixties. The idea of imagination's deep structure owes its incontestable fecundity to the relation that creates between creativity and codification. Such a dynamic structuralism is perfectly plausible. Separated from the imaginary the paradigms would be nothing else than empty classes of a more or less sophisticated taxonomy. The paradigms are matrixes meant to generate manifest structures in an unlimited number. So the criticism addressed to H. White – that he did not choose between determinism and free choice – seems to me to be easily refused: actually the formal matrixes open a limited space of selection. So we can discuss about a regulated production, a notion that reminds us of Kantian schematism, the so-called “method of producing images”. As a result the objections, which alternate regarding the rigidity of the taxonomy or regarding the aberration in the space of imaginative variations, bypass the originality of the project, regardless of its execution's hesitations and weaknesses. The idea that the author has backed down in panic in front of a possible limitless disorder seems to me not only improper but also wrong taking into consideration that it takes the form of an intention process<sup>5</sup>. The expression *bedrock of order* a little bit too dramatic cannot draw our attention from the pertinence of the problem created by the idea of a codification that functions in the same time as a constraint and the space of invention. Thus there is room for the exploration of mediation proposed by the practice of stylistics all along the history of literary tradition. There is left to be done the connection between formalism and historicity: the task to present the original characteristics of traditionalism that belongs to a system of rules that exists and is invented in the same time. This is what style is about. As an exchange I regret the dead end that H. White got into when he treated the intriguing operations as explicative modalities considered in the best case not interested in the scientific procedures of historical knowledge, and in the worst case interchangeable for the last ones. There is a real *category mistake* that generates a legitimate suspicion regarding the capacity of rhetoric theory to draw a line between historical and fictional story. As long as it is legitimate to treat the deep structures of the imaginary as common matrixes for the creation of novelistic and of historical intrigues, as it is testified by their inter-crossing in the history of genres in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is the more urgent to specify the referential moment that differentiates history from fiction. We cannot make this distinction if we remain within literary forms. It is no use to sketch a desperate exit to fall back on to simple common sense and to the most traditional utterances regarding historical truth! We have to articulate with patience the methods of representation and of explanation/comprehension and thus the documental moment and its matrix of supposed truth, that is to say the confession of those who declare that they were there where the events had happened. We will never find the rationality of this seeking the referential within the narrative structure. Precisely this labour of articulating the historic discourse with its complex operatory phrases is missing from H. White's preoccupations.

Thanks to these aporia of the historical discourse's referentiality, trying the sentences of H. White's narrative rhetoric by the horrible events put under the sign of “final solution” represent an exemplary defiance that overtakes any school exercise.

The defiance found a strong expression with the notion of “the limit of representation” that became the title of Saul Friedlander's work *Probing the Limits of Representation*<sup>6</sup>. The word could

mean two types of limits: on one hand a kind of exhausting the available forms of representation in our culture to confer legibility and visibility to the event called “the final solution”; on the other hand a request, an exigency to be said, to be represented, even coming right from the middle of the events, so from that origin of the discourse that is considered extra-linguistic by a theoretical tradition, excluded from semiotic fields. In the first case it would be about an internal limit, in the second case about an external limit. Then the problem would be the precise articulation of the two different typed of limits. In this phase of our discussion Shoah – because we have to call her like this – would propose for the reflection in the same time not only the singularity of a phenomenon set to the limit of experience and discourse, but also the exemplarity of a situation where not only the limits of representation with its narrative and rhetoric forms would be disclosed but the whole enterprise of writing history.

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1. Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979; *Tropics of Discourse*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978; *The Content of the Form*, 1987. Regarding these works: cf. *Temps et Récit*, t. I, op. cit., pp. 286-301; t. III, op.cit., pp. 279-282. Cf. Şi R.Chartier, „Figures rhétoriques et représentation historique”, *Au bord de la falaise*, op.cit., pp. 108-125.
2. The rhetoric theory of argumentation is in the topic of a contemporary debate. Cf. Wynne C.Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1961. Closer to the relationship between rhetorics and logics, Stephen E.Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1958; tred.fr., *Les Usages de l'argumentation*, Paris, PUF, 1993.
3. The idea is not unknown from Aristotle's *Poetics*, as long as the coefficient of probability is related to the putting into intrigue. The metaphor belongs not only to rhetorics but also to poetics as a theory of producing discourses.
4. After G.G.Granger (*Essai d'une philosophie du style*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1968). The concept of style should be compared to H. White's notion of style with the difference that for White style is not the concerted production of a singular answer appropriate for a single situation, but the most obvious expression of the constraints that govern the deep structures of the imaginary.
5. Hans Kellner, *Language und Historical Representation, Getting the Story Crooked*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989. The attack has a double target: on one hand the belief that there is out there a history that requires telling, on the other hand that pretension that this history can be “told *straight*” by an honest and hardworking historian using the *right* method. Only the second can be reproached to H. White. There is something voluntary, finally repressive in imposing order – as we can read at Foucault. The opposite plead for discontinuity starts with the research of the domain glorified by the prestige of the archives. The leftovers of the past are scattered as well as the testimonies about this past. The documentary discipline adds its own selective destructing effects to all modalities of loosing information that all together mutilates the so-called “documentary evidence”. Thus rhetoric is not added to the document but it accompanies it right from the source. So it is desirable for the story to attenuate the lacks that the documentary evidence brings along. But the story generates its own anxieties related to other discontinuities. There interferes the controversy with the typology introduced by H. White. The topological lecture, it is believed to become upsetting and thus other sources of anxieties if it is not built a new system on the bases of the four trope of White. The so-called „*bedrock of order*” shall be considered a kind of allegorical game where irony is in the same time recognised as the main trope within the system and as a point of view of the system. H. White becomes suspicious because he backed down in front of what he himself calls with a mixture of sympathy and anxiety at the end of his work *Tropics of Discourse*, „*the absurdist moment*”. The critic does not tell us how our history should be written and neither how history

negotiates with the a doubt not merely “hyperbolic” but really methodological, he tells us how history cannot be written.

6. Saul Friedlander (dir.), *Probing the Limits of Representation*, op.cit