

Entretiens

Interviews

Hayden White on “Facts, Fictions and Metahistory”

I. Metahistory and Metafiction: Historiography and the Fictive in the Work of Hayden White

An introductory essay

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Hayden White is Presidential Professor of Historical Studies at the University of California. He is also a faculty member of the History of Consciousness program at the University of California at Santa Cruz. He has taught at Wesleyan, UCLA and the University of Rochester, and was recently Visiting Professor at the University of California at Berkeley and at Stanford University. His works include Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973); Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978); and The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987).



Hayden White’s work is usually thought of in conjunction with his key concept “metahistory,” the critical philosophy of history which questions the foundations of the discipline of historiography and problematizes the unacknowledged ideologies which underlie all acts of history-writing. Yet the importance of White’s work lies also in the fact that it is a broad and far-ranging meditation on the structures of meaning and on the sense-making tropes that govern and pre-formulate our understanding of the worlds—past and present—that we inhabit. For White questions the narrative conventions

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which underpin the seemingly “neutral” and confidently empirical forms of historical discourse and he uncovers their necessary implication in ideology. This has meant that his work has found even more of an echo in the realm of literary studies than in the field of history. And as I will show after an outline of some of the key problematics in his thought, White’s work is also of central relevance to the kinds of questions being raised in much contemporary culture in connection with the debate surrounding the “postmodern,” and particularly as regards that self-reflexive and history-oriented mode of writing characteristic of postmodern fiction which Linda Hutcheon has called “historiographic metafiction.”¹

White’s main purpose is to reveal the way that even the most stringently positivist historian striving for pure objectivity necessarily relies upon a range of narrative forms and tropes by which to frame a story and convey its meaning. For “just as there can be no explanation in history without a story, so too there can be no story without a plot by which to make it a story of a particular kind.”² While conventional historiography aspires to a nineteenth-century ideal of scientific truthfulness and impartiality in re-presenting the “facts,” White demonstrates that even in the case of the most rigorous of historians, interpretation is unavoidable. He shows that forms of language and rhetoric are already burdened with moral and ideological implications, for there can be “no value-neutral mode of emplotment, explanation or even description in any field of events, whether imaginary or real. [...] [and thus] not only all interpretation, but also all language is politically contaminated.”³

Conventionally historians tend to take the position that interpretation is a weakness, a straying from the only righteous path, which is the impartial representation of pure facts. From this perspective interpretation becomes at best an unavoidable pitfall in the face of an incomplete historical record of events and can only be justified by the need to speculate in order to cover over the lacunae in the historical documents and make good their indeterminacies. Hayden White however views interpretation very differently. Rather than attempting to avoid interpretation altogether or cloaking the necessarily subjective component of interpretation in the disguises of positivism and objectivity, White advocates a position which turns the conventional wisdom on its head. For him interpretation is no longer an unavoidable by-product, a marginal supplement to the main process of piecing together the “facts,” but is instead central to the entire historiographic enterprise. As a consequence

1 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York & London: Routledge, 1988) 5.

2 Hayden White, “Interpretation in History,” *New Literary History*: 4 (1972-73). Rpt. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) 62. This collection of essays is hereafter cited in the text as *Tropics*.

3 Hayden White, “The Fictions of Factual Representation,” in *The Literature of Fact*, ed. Angus Fletcher (New York: Columbia UP, 1976). Rpt. *Tropics* 129.

interpretation should be practiced openly and self-consciously. As Dominick LaCapra points out, the “distinctive criterion for [White] is the attempt to make interpretative and explanatory strategies—which remain implicit in traditional historiography practiced as a craft—explicit, self-conscious, and subject to criticism.”⁴

This reconsideration of interpretation is related to a further major aspect of White’s project: his inquiry into the extent to which language and discourse prefigure the historical account. Thus his valorization of interpretation simultaneously becomes a call to historians to acknowledge the rhetorical or “tropic” nature of their discourse, that which prefigures or constitutes the object they attempt to represent. For the tropic element is unexpungeable in the human sciences, however realistic they may aspire to be. Tropics is the shadow from which all realistic discourse tries to flee. This flight, however, is futile; for tropics is the process by which all discourse *constitutes* the objects which it pretends only to describe realistically and to analyze objectively.⁵

In White’s system the use of tropes is viewed as having more than a merely rhetorical or representational function. Tropes are associated with the very “structures of consciousness” (*Tropics* 1) with which we are always trying to discern and define the real. If understanding is partly a process of making the unfamiliar appear familiar, then according to White “this process of understanding can only be figurative in nature, for what is involved in the rendering of the unfamiliar into the familiar is a troping that is generally figurative” (*Tropics* 5). Tropes and tropic narrativization are thus integral to the figurative process of understanding by which unfamiliar events and data are presented and comprehended via familiar categories. In this way the unfamiliar is “assimilated by analogy to those areas of experience felt to be *already* understood” (*Tropics* 5). Since the events which the historian describes are usually far removed from us and thus unfamiliar and alien, the historiographer’s mode of narrativization has the effect of placing a set of events within a familiar framework. The figurative function of narrativization then is “to encode the set in terms of culturally provided categories, such as metaphysical concepts, religious beliefs, or story forms.”⁶ (*Tropics* 86)

Alongside the process of familiarization, the alignment of the unknown in terms of what is already known, White also emphasizes the analogous movement of *defamiliarization*. For if troping is “a movement *from* one notion of the way things are related *to* another notion” (*Tropics* 2), then this also allows for an opposite effect, whereby tropic discourse offers “alternative ways of encoding this reality” (*Tropics* 4) so that an established and familiar version

4 Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983) 75.

5 Hayden White, “Introduction,” *Tropics* 1-24. Here 2.

6 Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” *Clio* 3.3 (1974). Rpt. *Tropics* 86.

of events can be opened up to new perspectives. This defamiliarizing function is important since it allows for the subversion of those discursive forms which, “because they are taken for granted either as natural or as established truth, had hardened into ideologies” (*Tropics* 22). In this way the function of figurative language as a means of recoding militates against conceptual dogmatism. At the same time the tropic function of discourse provides “protocols for translating between alternative modes” (*Tropics* 22), that is, for taking up alternative narrative versions and representational perspectives. This is crucial to the metahistorical consciousness advocated by White, since its widespread adoption would bring about the general recognition among historiographers that “it is not a matter of choosing between objectivity and distortion, but rather between different strategies for constituting ‘reality’ in thought so as to deal with it in different ways, each of which has its own ethical implications” (*Tropics* 22). If there are reasons for choosing one means of registering historical events over another—and Hayden White’s response to my question in the interview indicates that he believes that there *are* such reasons—then these criteria do not correspond to the usual ones prevailing in historiography, such as objectivity or closeness to truth.

One of the preferred criteria by which White measures history-writing—and this is possibly the distinguishing feature of his “metahistory” in general—is the degree to which historiography is willing to cultivate a certain self-consciousness regarding its tropological indebtedness and to concede the fictional bases of its explanatory moves. He observes that “one of the marks of a good professional historian is the consistency with which he reminds his readers of the purely provisional nature of his characterizations of events, agents and the agencies found in the always incomplete historical record” (*Tropics* 82). At the same time White points critically to those historians who display “a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (*Tropics* 82). His philosophy of history is clearly one which places the literary and compositional strategies of historiography in the foreground.

Far from considering the fictive element in historical narratives as a degradation of the discipline’s scientific aspirations, White finds support for his stance in a much earlier theoretical position which valorizes the fictional and the poetic as legitimate forms of knowledge in their own right. Since historians make sense of the past by imposing a narrative formal structure upon it similar to fiction, then “if we were to believe that literature did not teach us anything about reality” (*Tropics* 99) the fictional or figurative components in historiography could only detract from its value. But this is patently not the case. In point of fact we experience the “fictionalization” of history as an “explanation” for the same reason we experience great fiction as an illumination of a world that we inhabit along with the author. In both we

recognize forms by which consciousness both constitutes and colonizes the world it seeks to inhabit comfortably. (*Tropics* 99)

Thus history should not then be dismissed on account of its literary quality, such as its tropological or purely poetic elements, for from the earliest times "history, like other formalizations of poetic insight, was as much a 'making' (an *inventio*) as it was a 'finding' of the facts that comprised the structure of its perceptions" (*Tropics* 54).

Hayden White's position at this point comes close to the constructivism of Nelson Goodman. Like Goodman's insistence on the "theory-laden" quality of much of what is thought of as factual,⁷ White views the traditional historian's reliance on hard facts with the utmost suspicion, arguing that "historical facts are in no sense 'given' to the historian but are, rather, 'constituted' by the historian himself" (*Tropics* 56). Even where the historian seeks refuge in the appeal to the apparent solidity of the chronological sequence or documentary record, White argues that this record is also necessarily "mythological in nature. For the chronicle is no less constituted as a record of the past by the historian's own agency than is the narrative which he constructs on its basis" (*Tropics* 56). The historical record which might appear as the "hard data" on the basis of which the historian produces the representation of the past appears from White's metahistorical perspective as little more than the result of a necessarily interpretative process of selection, the complement to the interpretative process by which the indeterminacies of the historical record are speculatively filled.

As we have seen, one of the essential characteristics of Hayden White's work is the idea that the historian organizes or "narrativizes" the material much like a novelist or playwright, and so creates connections between events in order to produce a story, and along with it, a meaning with an accompanying moral or ideological position. To characterize this process he coins the term "emplotment," defining it in *Metahistory* as "the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind."⁸ Borrowing from the literary theorist Northrop Frye's classification of cultural archetypes White envisages four different forms of emplotment: Tragedy, Comedy, Romance and Satire. It is this process of emplotment as the "encodation of facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures" which transforms the material into paradigms already known to the readers, and so gives histories their "explanatory effect" (*Tropics* 83). For example, "when a given concourse of events is emplotted as a 'tragedy,' this simply means that the historian has so described the events as to *remind us* of that form of fiction which we associate

⁷ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978) 96-97, citing Norwood Hanson.

⁸ Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973) 7.

with the concept ‘tragic’” (*Tropics* 91). Correspondingly, a tragic plot-structure will produce particular connotations in the reception, reminding the reader for example of “the resignations of men to the conditions under which they must labor in the world. These conditions, in turn, are asserted to be unalterable and eternal” (*Metahistory* 9). On the other hand a comic emplotment will more likely be associated with the theme of harmony and “reconciliation” (*Metahistory* 27). Consequently one could imagine for example that a particular series of events concerning say, the industrial revolution, could be emplotted either as the “tragic” demise of an agrarian way of life, or alternatively as the “comic” rise of a new industrial period, depending on the ideological position of the historian and the intended effect upon the reader. As White observes in a key passage in his important article “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact”:

Historical situations are not inherently tragic, comic, or romantic. They may all be inherently ironic, but they need not be emplotted that way. All the historian needs to do to transform a tragic into a comic situation is to shift his point of view or change the scope of his perceptions. Anyway, we only think of situations as tragic or comic because these concepts are part of our generally cultural and specifically literary heritage. How a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian’s subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with a meaning of a particular kind. This is essentially a literary, that is to say fiction-making, operation. And to call it that in no way detracts from the status of historical narratives as providing a kind of knowledge. [...] [For] the encodation of events in terms of such plot structures is one of the ways that a culture has of making sense of both personal and public pasts. (Tropics 85)

In this way the narrative emplotment of the historical account calls upon the cultural repertoire of the reader, so that a history organized by means of a particular generic pattern produces not only a specific kind of meaning but also a specific kind of response. In other words, like an “extended metaphor” the narrativization “does not *reproduce* the events it describes; it tells us in what direction to think about the events and charges our thought about the events with different emotional valences” (*Tropics* 91).

This act of predetermining the reader’s understanding of the historical account via the narrative form of the text is again evidence of the fact that there is always “an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of reality” (*Metahistory* 21). For any formal structure in the historical account necessarily has ideological implications for an understanding of events, since “commitment to a particular form of knowledge predetermines the *kinds* of generalization one can make” (*Metahistory* 21). The importance of this is that the ethical and ideological position of a particular historical account can no longer be held separate. For there is necessarily an ethical or ideological implication in the way that in every historical text “an *aesthetic* perception (the

emplotment) and a *cognitive* operation (the argument) can be combined so as to derive prescriptive statements from what may appear to be purely descriptive or analytical ones" (*Metahistory* 27).

Consequently White's analysis in *Metahistory* for example of nineteenth-century historical writing sets about describing the possible combinations of the four forms of "emplotment" with those of formal "argument," so as to reveal the third level: the "ideological implications" of what might otherwise pass as a straightforward "factual" account. White's model makes clear that particular choices and strategies are always involved in any act of historical writing, and that there can be no escape into the seemingly neutral realm of a "scientific approach." Indeed the choice of such an approach "represents only the statement of a preference for a specific modality of historical conceptualization, the grounds of which are either moral or aesthetic, but the epistemological justification of which still remains to be established" (*Metahistory* xii). The real motivation then behind the choice of a particular approach or of a particular perspective is revealed always to be "ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological" (*Metahistory* xii). It is this underlying conviction that the aesthetic or moral grounds represent the best, indeed the only reasons for choosing one particular perspective or mode of narrativization over another—such as the epistemological or the scientific-objective stance—that offer a particularly challenging, not to say liberating aspect of Hayden White's work for all those involved in the interpretation of culture, whether from a historical or a literary standpoint.

After this outline of the work of Hayden White concerning fiction, history and their interrelations it is worth indicating why, over and beyond his impact in the field of history, his work has been so relevant in literary circles, particularly as regards the recent debates on contemporary culture and poststructuralism, and those forms of imaginative writing that, for want of a better term, we have come to refer to as "postmodernism."

As in the work of White, there is a deep-seated scepticism in postmodern culture generally concerning both the status of historical accounts and all systems of reference. The postmodernist writers also direct their theoretical reflections, like White, towards the boundary dividing history and fiction, and the fundamental premises of postmodern culture are to a very large extent precisely those that underpin White's metahistorical approach to historiography. Both insist upon the central idea that historians and novelists alike do not so much reflect and represent the objects of their investigations as actively produce these objects of inquiry themselves. There is a shared suspicion in other words that facts are not given but constructed, and that random and contingent events are made meaningful and are transformed into sense-making entities—what we confidently refer to afterwards as "facts"—only thanks to such figurative conventions as narrativization. A common thread running both through White's work and through postmodernism is

thus a fundamental scepticism regarding the assignment of any authoritative status to one historical account over another, as well as a corresponding awareness of the ideological content necessarily implied by every narrative form as a fictional construct.

White's key term "metahistory" finds significant echoes in Linda Hutcheon's influential work on the postmodern where her central paradigm is the "historiographic metafiction." For Hutcheon this describes a range of self-reflexive strategies through which the text appears to register its own "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs."⁹ As with White's criterion of the "self-consciousness" which marks out the "classic" historians, in "historiographic metafiction" there is an abiding metahistorical sense of the provisionality of all meaning, not least given the shortcomings of language. White's formulation of this self-reflexivity is very pertinent to the situation of the postmodern "metafiction." He maintains that there is an ironic recognition that any given linguistic protocol will obscure as much as it reveals about the reality it seeks to capture in an order of words. This *aporia* or sense of contradiction is present in *all* of the classic historians. It is this linguistic self-consciousness which distinguishes them from their mundane counterparts and followers, who think that language can serve as a perfectly transparent medium of representation. (*Tropics* 130)

Thus just as White envisages what he describes in the interview as a "philosophy of composition" (Lukacs) as integral to the process through which the historical account theorizes its own discursive position, so in the same way the postmodern text foregrounds its own sense-making activity, as well as its creation of what remain only provisional constructions of meaning.

The postmodern text not only draws attention to its own semantic provisionality. In the very language and mode of representation it employs it frequently points also to its own ethical interests and ideological investments. Both metahistory and metafiction alike inscribe into the text then the sense that their accounts are only fictional and provisional, and that they exist moreover in a pluralistic relationship with alternative accounts, whereby no single fictional account is more valid than another. White correspondingly accords a particular status for example to those historical accounts which attempt to "come to terms with other plausible emplotments." For it is "this dialectical tension between two or more possible emplotments that signals the element of critical self-consciousness present in any historian of recognizably classical stature" (*Tropics* 94). This productive pluralism in White's thinking finds a parallel expression and takes an imaginative form in many postmodern texts with their themes of the co-existence of other possible worlds, or of

⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York & London: Routledge, 1988) 5. See also *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York & London: Routledge, 1989).

multiple and often contradictory versions of the past in which mutually exclusive events and outcomes proliferate and intersect.

Finally there is an important link between White's emphasis on the historical text as a narrative and figurative construct made of a combination of plots and arguments, and the way that many contemporary texts foreground their own condition both as highly constructed entities resulting from a complex process of textual intersections. The shared conviction emerges that it is only through the textualizing process, as that which imposes figurative form upon the chaos of events, that we can produce meanings. This characteristically contemporary position is important for the art of the present day, as can be seen in the way that the postmodern work misses no opportunity to highlight its own textuality, and to point to the all-pervasiveness of the text- and image-culture from which it springs. For if it is true, as White implies, that we can only accept as knowledge that which has first been turned into a text and rendered as familiar and acceptable paradigms by the process of narrativization, then the implications of this position for a characterization of the postmodern imagination are crucial: it leads directly to the all-determining and increasingly important awareness—an awareness which Hayden White's work articulates as powerfully as anyone writing today—that history itself can ultimately only ever be encountered *as text*.

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II. A Discussion with Hayden White

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Maybe a good place to start would be with a key term of yours—narrative “emplotment.” You say that, depending on which narrative plot or genre is chosen—Tragedy, Comedy, Romance, and Satire—the historian can emplot the “same” set of events, and presumably produce very different effects upon the reader. Are there other consequences of emplotment—that is, over and beyond the hidden “ideological implications” of narrativization that you discuss—for example, emplotment as a way of positioning the recipient?

Sure, sure, I mean, from Hegel on through Marx down to Fredric Jameson most recently, the ideology of form and the way in which a given set of generic conventions carry their own ideological burden with them, just as form: there’s a content in the form itself that isn’t perceived if you think of the form just as kind of an empty container into which you can put any variety of subject matter. Marx in *The 18th Brumaire* begins by saying that Hegel remarks somewhere that every event occurs as it were twice, but that he neglected to mention the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. The opening of *The 18th Brumaire*, the first few pages, are about why the genre chosen by Hugo and Proudhon is the wrong one in which to represent the events of 1848. It’s a generic confusion. And he goes ahead to emplot those events as a farce, which is his way of setting them over against—in terms of their seriousness, their implications, and so forth—the earlier revolution of 1789 of the bourgeoisie. That was a heroic phase, this is the phase at the beginning of their demise. Well, he was wrong about that. But in any event the question here had to do with what’s the appropriate *form* in which to represent these events. And he suggests that both Victor Hugo and Proudhon have chosen the wrong genre. They still think this is heroic or tragic, one or the other. Proudhon thinks it’s an heroic set of events that he’s portraying, Victor Hugo thinks it’s a tragedy. Marx says it’s neither, it’s a farce. And he goes on to show you why that’s the best way of emplotting it. So this has to do really with the idea of the ideology of form and the idea that the form itself is the ideology. Now this is what Fernand Braudel effectively argues in one of his essays when he says, We in the Annales-group want to get rid of narrative. Why do we want to get rid of narrative? Not a specific narrative, not a specific genre or mode of narration, but narrative in general. Why? Because narrative itself is what’s wrong, is what makes this into a bourgeois ideology. A narrative satisfies all our desire to think that things can be wrapped up neatly, that a certain kind of heroism is possible against the great forces of history and he says this deludes us. It’s exactly the argument that Brecht had against classical theater, over against which he sets epic theater. The classical theater seduces the reader into

thinking, Ah! all's right with the world because what I'm watching here in the darkness of the theater can be resolved, equity can be achieved, distributive justice is possible, and so forth. Brecht wants to turn on the lights. Show what's backstage, the props and everything, jolt the audience out of their somnolence, so I think that that's one of the things that the Annales-group tried to do when they wanted to shift not only the content of historical writing from the turbulence of the short political conflict to the *longue durée*. But they also said you must change the form.

By the way, this was exactly Lukacs's idea when he asked the question "To describe or narrate?" Now he thought narrative was absolutely necessary for a realistic representation of history. I think he was wrong. Wrong first of all in posing the question as the matter of a choice between description and narration. But he was certainly right in highlighting what he called the "philosophy of composition." That was absolutely necessary for an historian or novelist or what-have-you. The real problem of course with people like Lukacs and so forth is they didn't really problematize historical writing. They thought that could be taken as a kind of neutral place where you could then assess the relative realism of different novelists or literary writers.

You said Braudel wanted to get rid of narrative? Isn't the idea of trying to get rid of narrative similar to the aims of those historians you refer to in Metahistory, who try obstinately to stick just to the chronicle, to the "documentary" record?

That's right. You see the naive person would think that a simple chronicle of events is a history. Every historian knows that a chronological ordering of the events is only preliminary to the emplotment of those events in order to transform them into a history. An ironic move beyond that would be to go back to chronicle very self-consciously in order to *dis*-emplot, in order to show the way in which the given emplotment was a construction. So that's what I had in mind. It's rather like Robbe-Grillet, you know, get rid of characters, get rid of events, get rid of the plot, and see what you've got left. [Laughter].

Well, what do you have left then?

Well, one of the things that you have is some facts. You have the discontinuous forms and one of the things that you show also is that a chronological sequence is itself relative to the culture because there are different chronologies and different chronological conventions. So there is what is regarded as a kind of a zero degree against which you can measure emplotment, the chronological sequence. Then there are various distortions of it or fiddlings with it that give you certain distinctive novelistic effects, let us say, or dramatic effects. Let's take out all the dramatic effects until you get

down to the point where you have nothing but chronology. *Then* you can see the chronology itself is a construction.

So there's no real raw data since it's always a construction?

How could there be? I mean, the notion of raw data is something that no scientist would believe in.

What about Waterloo, 1815, that kind of stuff?

Well, "1815" is the chronological designation, right? "Waterloo" is the place. "Battle" is the generic characterization of those events that occurred there. But, when you think of [Stendhal's] *The Charterhouse of Parma*, you remember that Fabrice wants to go to join Napoleon, and what happens? He goes there and he wanders onto the battlefield and he's completely confused and when he leaves, he's told a great battle was fought and he says, "Oh, is *that* what that was?" He sees instead a series of farcical events. Well, I think that that notion of raw data is what you get when you collapse the idea of "event" into the idea of "fact." Many people say "But what are the real facts?" Well, a fact—and here I follow Barthes—is a linguistic phenomenon pure and simple. It is a statement, a predication, that so-and-so happened or so-and-so was or so-and-so did x at time, place, line z. The fact therefore is a result of a reflection on something that you can designate as an "event." The event comes self-designated in the documents as a battle that occurred. But that designation itself is a construction. So the document is already a construction of what will constitute the event. And then the fact is that which is a result of critical reflection on the adequacy of the documentary account. So for me there is no raw data.

Not even in the sense that there might be raw data but it doesn't yet mean anything because it hasn't been given a meaning?

Yes, of course "things happen"—and using that locution we're already in trouble... [Laughter]. But the scientific notions of event can't separate the idea of fact from event because according to the philosophers that work on these questions (I think of Arthur Danto especially), a fact is an event under a description. The event is something "given" in the sense that someone records an occurrence. If the occurrence hasn't been recorded, it's not even something that's going to be speculated about. But if it's been recorded by a witness or two or more witnesses or however many you need, then the question has to do with whether that recording and the characterization of the given in the original recording is adequate or not, whether it's an accurate one, and the

fact then is the result of trying to compare different accounts or records of occurrences.

So for me, of course things happen to people in the way that someone gets run over by a truck. That's one thing. You can establish that pretty well without any problem. But was the taking of the Bastille the beginning of the French Revolution or not, that is much more difficult. Is that the beginning? Tocqueville thought no, he thought you had to go back to the Reformation to see where the beginning of the French Revolution was. So I believe that the real difficulty in historical writing and in all forms of realistic discourse, social science writing and so forth, is that you can't replicate historical events in a laboratory situation as you can in physics or chemistry or what-have-you. And therefore you can't set up laboratory controls over your description of whether this kind of event is an event of type A or not, whether this event occurred at time C, D or E or not. These are the sorts of questions you can ask about physical events. But historical events are not physical events. They're the result of actions of people who are oftentimes responding or reacting to physical events, but the historical event is itself a product of this reaction and always involves the intentionality, etc. of the agents. And you can't replicate those because the agents are dead. And by definition they're individuals and you can never replicate them. So every set of putative historical facts giving us an account of events is more like virtual reality than it is old-fashioned raw data.

Perhaps we should talk about the philosophy of history, its importance in your work and where you place it as regards historiography?

From around 1950 philosophers of history have been saying that no one believes in philosophy of history, right? There's history but there's no philosophy of history that is legitimate, so they tried to get rid of all of them, especially Marxism. That was another thing that offended many of the historians, both here and abroad, when I said that every history presupposes a philosophy of history. So in the same way that I seem to collapse the distinction between fact and fiction, so too the distinction between history and philosophy of history.

Is there such a thing as a history which is not also a metahistory at the same time?

They're *all* metahistories. It's an illusion, it's a founding illusion of modern objectivist historiography, that *they* have myth, but *we* have real history. The Germans have philosophy of history, we do real history. That's why they got upset at my notion of "metahistory," you see, and the notion that every history presupposes a whole complex web of commitments, ontological, epistemological, and so forth, that represents the suppressed philosophy of history that makes possible the writing... But when you think about historical

reality, whatever you mean by it, it's a chaos. There are too many facts, there are too many events, there's too many things happening. How do you get any sense out of it? You must postulate a metalanguage of some sort, you must start emplotting these events, you must exclude certain events, you must decide what is an important as against an unimportant event, and all those operations. It can be done on the basis of an implicit philosophy of history that tells you what's important, what's not important. Or it can be done on the basis of a rhetorically self-conscious philosophy of composition in which you more or less self-consciously recognize the aim you want to serve or have realized by writing your history this way rather than some [other] way and going ahead and doing it. That's the advantage it seemed to me of Marxism—they lay their cards on the table at least—whereas the straight historian claims to have no cards to play: "we're merely telling it like it is." I deny that that's possible in history, in the depiction of social reality.

You mentioned, in connection with the reception of your work in France, that Roger Chartier has published a critique entitled, "Four Questions to Hayden White."

Yes. Along the lines of "Aren't you threatened by relativism?"... "Isn't your approach relativistic?"...

What's your answer?

Correct. [Laughter] Yes. But it doesn't follow that you can say anything you want to about the text. All relativism does, as I envision it at least, is say that the kinds of questions you ask of a text or of history or of social reality, are context-specific. They're grounded in the experience, what Kosellek calls the "space of experience." There's the place that questions arise. These questions are not universal questions, they're not something that are found in all cultures. And then the criteria for determining what constitutes an adequate answer or solution to those questions are *also* context-specific in the same way that, for example, a national language allows you to ask certain questions that you couldn't ask in some other language, right?

What I'm suggesting isn't a kind of an absolute relativism. In certain sciences, in certain practices of representation such as history, the questions, the criteria for answers, are judged by culturally specific criteria. This is not the same thing as saying that this is also the case with physics or something like that. But in point of fact the human sciences are not *sciences* in the same way that physics is. You can transport physics from Japan to the United States and back, but you cannot transport historical inquiry. It's like psychoanalysis. It's very difficult to export psychoanalysis to Japan or China, where cultural factors have created completely different notions of selfhood and so forth. So the kind of questions that the [Western] psychoanalyst would put and did put to the

survivors of Hiroshima or Nagasaki are not the kind of questions that a Japanese psychologist would recognize as pertinent. So I think it's the notion of pertinency. In the same way literary discourse would have to be considered "culture-specific." It's very interesting to think of the way in which certain styles of writing just don't translate, right?

You refer to the human sciences. Obviously, since the whole approach of your work is rhetorical in nature, it must be completely at odds with those historians who think of themselves as scientists and who do indeed regard their work as culturally "translatable."

The historians, you see, have been getting so much mileage for the last 150 years on the idea that they represent *objective* takes on reality, that they serve as a kind of paradigm of any kind of inquiry into social reality in the present. That idea is one that has really sustained history as a legitimate discipline. It's allowed them to suppress the extent to which the discourse itself constitutes the objects of historians' analysis and they've been allowed and permitted—for reasons that Foucault makes quite clear—to pose as representatives of an objectivist way of looking at reality because the past, after all, is over and done with. It's fixed. You ought to be able to have objective, transculturally creditable knowledge about this past. This has allowed them to obscure the fact that historical discourse really has to constitute its object of analysis first by some preliminary or initial description of it, in a particular language, metalanguage or code. And this works it up, prepares it as a possible object of knowledge, of a particular kind of knowledge.

Everybody will recognize that history is an invention of Western culture. But they think that, physics, Copernican physics or Newtonian physics, is translatable. It's not. That's why history written by a Japanese scholar today would be regarded as perfectly adequate within the Japanese context but wouldn't even be recognized as such here. I have friends in philosophy—philosophy's the same sort of thing—I asked friends in philosophy, "Why don't you ever teach African philosophy?" They say, "There is no African philosophy." I say, "You mean they don't have an epistemology, an ontology, and so forth?" And they say, "Well, they may have, but it's all myth, you see." When they say they do philosophy here, they mean philosophy of the Cartesian sort or analytical sort. This had to do with styles or manners of thinking. My relativism isn't different from Wittgenstein's appeal to the notion of the life forms to which criteria of felicitousness have to be referred in order to know whether someone's using a language, playing a language game adequately or not.

When you look at forms of history writing, even within a particular context, how would you distinguish between legitimate or illegitimate forms?

I think it's a purely conventional criterion. By that I mean, conventionalist. The criterion for determining what is an adequate professionally competent form of history writing is, again, culture-specific. It changes continually. What was adequate history in the 16th century was not so in the 18th century, 19th century, 20th century and so forth. Styles of writing change in history as they do elsewhere. But it wasn't until the 19th century that history was constituted as a profession, and moved into the canon. History wasn't taught in the universities until the 19th century. The reason it was taught in the universities in the 19th century was that it was providing a basis for the constitution of these national genealogies... So historians since that time have felt that whatever is the dominant form of history at a particular place and a particular time represents the *final* form. But in reality they're always only styles. Up until the early 19th century, history writing was regarded as a branch of rhetoric. It was located under rhetoric. If you looked in any rhetorical handbook from the 18th century, when they discussed it they typically divided poetry and prose. Under prose, there was discourse, prose discourse, there's public forms, private forms. In public forms, there's history, philosophy, epistolary writing, and the romance. These are the four forms that are all regarded as falling under that domain of rhetoric—without any pretense that there's anything going on here in the way of science.

While your criterion of legitimacy is not oriented towards the "scientific" I do see in your work a consistent goal of self-consciousness. You clearly place particular emphasis on the fact that historians should work self-consciously. In one of your articles "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" in Tropics of Discourse, you talk about the truly classical historians as the ones that preserve a dialectical tension between two or more possible emplotments. That dialectical tension is also similar I think to a kind of self-consciousness...

That's right. Well, see, as long as you believe that the form of reality that you're studying in the past is in the materials, is given by the materials, either the documentary record or the events themselves, you don't need a great deal of self-consciousness about your writing up of them. You can go under the illusion that you're merely transcribing or delineating a form you've found. The great historians, the ones that are recognized as the classic writers of history, are always the ones who are aware that there are always at least two possibilities for characterizing the field that they're studying. And I think it's that tension that gives to them their interpretability, that makes them interpretable differently, one generation after another. As with Gibbon, for

example. Gibbon is in style at one time and place, he's out of style another, then comes back in. The same thing is true of people like Burckhardt or even Ranke, although he's kind of the father figure of the discipline, in his academic incarnation. But I think it is true that if you were aware that there were at least two plausible interpretations or representations of anything that came into your field of vision, then you would necessarily be thrown back upon a kind of reflecting upon the choices you make. Some years ago they used a piece of glass as a surface for Matisse's painting. Have you ever seen that?

Was it Picasso?

Yes, it may have been. And they did the slow-motion cinematic portrayal of the brush strokes that he made and they slowed it down to show the hesitation, the possibility of going one way or the other. It showed that what looked like a smooth kind of representational practice was in reality made up of thousands of kind of hesitations between alternative possibilities. I think that the resolution of that has some kind of consistency with what we mean by style, which incidentally is Foucault's definition of style too. And Foucault is a relativist too. After all, relativism seems to me like an old problem, I mean an old hat kind of a question that only a discipline whose doxa was stuck somewhere around 1920 could still be debating.

There seems to be something particularly contemporary about the idea of self-conscious writing or this idea of a tension between simultaneously existing alternative versions. You say that the "classic" historians were always aware of this tension between different possibilities. But as a cultural "dominant" it seems to be a particularly modern phenomenon. It seems to go a step beyond even the idea of presenting not just one perspective but lots of them, simultaneously and contradictorily, as in Cubism. And it seems to me that this idea has developed even further in contemporary writing, to the extent that postmodern writers are obsessed by the idea of foregrounding the fictive when they present history, or in depicting the real as multiple possibilities.

Well, that's certainly true. But I wouldn't even say postmodern. You mentioned painting, you mentioned Cubism. After all, Cubism is early 20th century and this question of conflicting or alternative perspectives being put into the same frame is exactly what they were doing, just as in Surrealism. The testing of the codes we can say, the metalanguages, is what was going on. I think that of course, as regards the field of history in the 19th and 20th centuries, the visual arts, the representational visual arts were much more experimental than their equivalents in prose writing especially. So the question of how you could build in multi-perspectival views upon a single reality or continuous reality is interesting. Perspectivalism—this after all was the question that Nietzsche posed.

Now of course when I say Nietzsche, all my colleagues say "Fascism," right? Carlo Ginzburg says, "You start out a relativist, but this makes even fascism possible" because you end up with some kind of pragmatic conception of what a true account is. I accept the pragmatist one. It seems to me liberating insofar as you liberate yourself from the illusion that you're producing absolute truth. I think this is a modernist invention. For example, there is the modernist critique of tradition as an illusion insofar as it's continuous, whole, organic, and so forth. This concentration on the fragment, upon discontinuous discourse, it's right at the basis of Pound, Eliot, and Joyce's conception of history, which I think is a much more realistic conception than the finely-wrought narratives with their glossy textures and their seamlessness and their continuities that were characteristic of historians writing at the same time.

If history writing has always been a form of fictionality, a form of narrative writing, then what is it, about modern writing, 20th-century writing, that stands out? I mean, if historiography has always been fictive, there must be something that has changed in the 20th century to make us so aware of the fact that it's fiction?

Yes, I see what you mean. I realize now that in using the distinction between fact and fiction, I was complicit in the ideology that underwrote history's claim to objectivity and scientificity. It seems to me that it's always been narrative. There is a sense in which history has always been fiction, if we take fiction in its broad philosophical sense of hypothetical postulates about the nature of reality, in the sense that Ernst Mach or the neo-Kantians used the concept of the "Als ob" approach, "Let us act as if we had an adequate accountable world." That would be fictional. Now if you mean by fiction, fabulous or merely imaginary as against real, the possible as against the actual, then history aspires not to be that, right? It aspires to be anything but imaginary and fabulizing and so forth. I made a mistake in saying there's factual discourse, and there's fictional discourse. Because fictional discourse turns out to be just another version of factual discourse and history. Or the factual discourse turns out to be a particular kind of convention that will call itself non-fictional even though its products are fictional in nature. I now feel that people like Foucault and Barthes were quite right in suggesting that modernist writing is neither fictional nor factual. Something like the sort of thing that you've been arguing in some of your work. Namely, that literature is a third possibility.

I'm writing an essay right now called "Literature Against Fiction." It seems to me that the great modernists certainly are trying to represent reality. They're doing it in a different style, a different mode from anything that 19th-century realist conventions—whether they be naturalism or what-have-you—had in mind. So literary writings, in the early 19th century by people like

Flaubert, but also elsewhere in western Europe, were invented in such a way that we can say that there's a new kind of language-use that comes into play at this time, and that while it may look like fiction—insofar as *Madame Bovary* is about imaginary people located in a specific time and places with proper names, like Rouen, what-have-you—the question is, how does this writing differ from every form of fiction that we might have imagined before it? We know there are certain stylistic attributes such as “style indirect libre,” that we can name at least, that makes it different. One of the things that makes it different is that it erases the marks of its fictionality. In some sense, it's writing that always scumbles or blurs the distinction between fact and fiction, not in order to make the factual fictional or the fictional factual, but to say that the representation of reality can no longer be carried out responsibly on the basis of that older distinction between fact or fiction, one or the other, where it has to be either/or.

Literary writing, I think you should agree on the basis of your own work,¹⁰ literary writing in modernism is a new kind of cat. And what makes it a new kind of cat is that it questions the distinction that had made Western realism possible, namely, the possibility of thinking that you could adequately distinguish between fact and fiction, from the time of Aristotle on. So that Aristotle's opposition of poetry to history—history is what really happened, poetry is what is imaginable—that distinction became a kind of orthodoxy that continued to underwrite the distinctiveness of fictional writing, whether in poetry or prose, right down until the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century. Then, I think as a result of the French Revolution, you have experimentation of the kind that Flaubert, Baudelaire carried out, even of the kind that Goethe was interested in, certainly Heine. I think Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* and I think Carlyle's *French Revolution* are *great* meditations on the fact/fiction distinction and the problematizing of it. Quite different from Sir Walter Scott. Sir Walter Scott is aware that there is a problem here, but he thinks he can resolve it by making *quite* clear what is fact and what is fiction, and putting in all those prefaces and appendices, documents and so forth.

Taking your example Dickens as an instance of a 19th-century writing of history, a literary writing of history would presumably be something which meditates upon the problem of history-writing but doesn't necessarily concede all the time that that's exactly what it's doing.

It doesn't quite conceive it. Flaubert is aware, the French realists and Flaubert problematize realism, right? As do so many of the writers in the French tradition. But I think we can say that there's a sense in which Flaubert and Baudelaire anticipate a certain kind of modernist writing. But in the period

¹⁰ Richard J. Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism and the Problem of Postmodernity*, appearing with Cambridge UP, 1997.

just before and after the First World War, something else happens. Maybe it has to do with the problem—or with confronting the problem—of trying to represent the horrors of the First World War, to try to find a different way, a way of representing the unimaginable but real. And I think that's exactly the problem that people face when they reflect on the Holocaust now. I mean, how do you represent the Holocaust responsibly without a kind of fake realism or without allowing your discourse to fall into kind of dream-like trances of non-reflexivity? I don't know.

If the First World War represents a problem which also becomes a kind of turning-point in art, do you also see any other transitions or transformations later on?

Yes, I think postmodernism is a variation on modernism myself. I see it of course as a reaction. But when I say postmodernism, I mean the reaction to literary modernism, I don't mean the reaction to the Enlightenment, Habermas and so forth. That's a different question from the one that Rorty, Habermas and others were debating, having to do with the Enlightenment. And I think that some time after the Second World War, with Robbe-Grillet, or someone like that, there was a beginning. Maybe it had to do with the 2nd or 3rd generation of modernists. I think that you begin to get a sense of the limitations of that earlier heroic period of modernism and, frankly, I think a kind of loss of belief in the modernist project, with the result that the world of the "grandfathers" if you wish, the first generation of moderns, becomes subjected to various kinds of satire. Their techniques and so forth become parodied and lampooned and it's that sense of parody, of liberation through parody that really is much more characteristic. I think that in modernism you still really have a serious engagement with traditional models, really a serious one, because that's what leads to the first generation of moderns. Pound, Eliot, and so on, all these guys are trained in classical writing and it's very difficult for them to break out of it. By the time you get to the end of the Second World War, who cares about classical writing to begin with. It doesn't seem to be a very desirable project to explode it, you know.

You appear to take the modernist writers as your main point of orientation, is that right? Is modernism central for you?

I'm still working out the questions posed by modernism. I think it's generational. After all, for me, coming into "intellectual adolescence" just after the Second World War, the writers we had to deal with were Pound, you know. I had a correspondence with Pound from Italy as a young man when I was still a graduate student, when he was at St. Elizabeth's Hospital. It wasn't extensive correspondence, but I felt Pound was the kind of person we had to come to terms with. Joyce still. *Finnegan's Wake* was just what?... 1939 or something like that. It's still the text that's primary for my generation. And I don't think

you ever quite get away from this if you're an intellectual. For me Jean-Paul Sartre was absolutely crucial in my formation. I could never just dismiss him like later generations.

Talking of Sartre raises the question of political choice. One of your commentators, Peter Da Bolla, has linked your work with that of Fredric Jameson, saying that you both have the same "utopian" drive.¹¹ What about the political dimension of your work?

I've always regarded myself as a Marxist. I don't believe that you can be a modern historian and not have a Marxist dimension to your work, the base-superstructure dimension, the class analysis, and above all the idea of dialectic. You can't have sophisticated historiography without that. I think that's something that Marx had and that all the great historians of the 19th century all have versions of that, of one kind or another. But for the utopian dimension, though, I felt that what was wrong with Marxism was that, in rejecting formalism, it had great difficulty coming to the understanding of the ideology of form, which I think has been an achievement of the second half of the 20th century. And so like Barthes, whom I admire enormously, what you needed to add to the Marxist dimension—which sort of prided itself on finally getting to the reality behind the illusions—was an analysis of the forms of historical discourse, including Marxism itself. Marxism could not claim to be self-reflexive and so forth unless it historicized its own position. And it failed to do that—Marx less so than many of the Marxists who came after him.

What does it mean to historicize or situate your own position in this regard?

What does it mean to situate your own position? It means to account not only for the interest you have in a specific content of history, but also the interest you have in representing it in a particular way. So it seemed to me a formalist analysis was necessary. And you know, Barthes said that himself first of all. He said a little formalism leads you away from history, but a lot of formalism leads back. It's one of my favorite epigrams. Fred Jameson really is the one who has done this in everything he's written since *Marxism and Form*. And even in his doctoral dissertation he raised the whole question of the status of narrative in Sartre. I think that with this dimension—what does that mean about utopianism and so forth—one really has to do with the "imaginary" (I mean the Lacanian *imaginaire*) as providing a ground for understanding utopian impulses, impulses toward wholeness, health, social health, reparation of the body politic, and all those sorts of things. That's an imaginary projection against whatever symbolic forms of integration one is presented with and always has to resist.

¹¹ Peter Da Bolla, "Disfiguring History," *Diacritics* 16. 4 (1986): 49-58.

It seems to me that we've inherited the idea that there was ideology on the one side and history on the other. And history could always be used to show the distortion implicit in any given ideology. I think that opposition is utterly wrong. Momigliano says, "Where there's ideology there is no history; where there's history there is no ideology." That's ridiculous. History is another form of ideological encodation of reality and it can be done in a progressive way, leading towards a utopian-founded critique of present social reality; or it can be done in a very conservative way, ending up justifying present reality as it is.

But still in your writing, you don't valorize any particular form of history writing.

Well, no, but I do think that there are limits that are set by the culture on what will be permitted to pass for a serious historical representation. And these limits are the limits of the culture. When some people say that this culture has no historical consciousness, what they mean is they don't have a recognizable one—usually in the light of some colonial administration's conception of what history is. [Laughter]

I'd like to bring up a thought we had earlier about your reception in France and whether you see any links in your work to recent French thought?

Recent French thought... well, people interested in my work tend to be the younger generation, not the kind of "establishment." The establishment tends to regard it as kind of interesting but off the mark. This is true of people whom I really respect and who read my stuff and say, "Well, you know, that's one way of looking at it, but it's kind of an American way." And I think there's much to that. We in the United States have in the first place this devotion to belief in history, as that drama in which we are the principal protagonists leading the way of Western civilization westward, on the one hand. And on the other, we are very skeptical of history insofar as history has always been of course written by, for and about the aristocracy. History is and has always been about nobility, people who "matter," are "somebody." And the populism in the United States and the pragmatism that I think are intrinsic to our culture really give us a different insight into history from anything produced by a French aristocrat or a German "Herr" of some kind or another, a Prussian. So I believe that that is important, and also our secularism. We did not experience the Middle Ages—that makes us utterly different from the rest of Western Europe. I think that makes us very much similar to Latin Americans too. So I believe that New World history is inevitably different, has different concerns, different formulations... and so too for New World historiography. When I lecture in France or Italy, they say "Well, this is very interesting, but we wouldn't ask those questions."

One of the things I was thinking of before when I asked about the links between your work and recent thought in France is that it seems to me that there is not only a telling skepticism in your work regarding what constitutes history and what constitutes fiction—but that it seems to become an anti-foundational move, of the kind that happens so frequently in post-structuralist thought.

Yes, it is, it is.

I'm thinking of the work of people like Lyotard, his undermining of the "master narratives" or even Derrida (on whom I know you have written) and his move regarding the "transcendental signifieds." There seems to be an obvious link between your work and Derrida's, and Foucault's as well...

Yeah, very much. That's quite right. Lyotard and I have exchanged, and spoken often about this kind of thing. He got interested in the sublime and he said he was reading an article that I wrote. The master-narrative idea is interesting, yes. He kind of deconstructs all these master-narratives at a level other than content. It's one thing to say that the master-narrative of Christianity is gone, of 19th-century progress, Karl Marx... And it's one thing to say that no one believes in the master-narrative. But in point of fact, almost everyone does, and even if they don't believe in, say, the Christian one or the classical one or the 19th-century master-narrative bourgeois progress and so forth, they all believe in *some* kind of narrative. Even Lyotard was forced to postulate "le petit récit," right? And that's still a narrative. Now that means that the narrative form is still treated as if it were neutral. The way to destroy belief in the master narrative is to destroy the narrative part.

Everyone points out that even the belief in the end of the master narrative is a kind of master narrative. And postmodernism has its own narrative, right? I would be wrong to put it in terms of a content-versus-form issue, because what we're looking for in postmodernism is a third alternative to that simple opposition, form and content. So when it comes to master narratives, I don't think that is a very insightful way of characterizing postmodernism, the end of the master narrative.

Previously when we spoke about Marxism and your position, and about the utopian dimension of your work, you said that you would call yourself a Marxist historian. But on the other hand, a Marxist historian in the mold of, say, Lukacs, would be one that would say, Okay, this is not my idea of history, this is History per se, teleological, and so on... So isn't there a difference here to your kind of Marxism?

That's right. Mine is much more existentialist. Along with Marxism, it's always been an existentialist framework. That was the importance of Jean-Paul

Sartre for me when I discovered him at age 18 or something like that. The idea that you have to choose among alternative possibilities. And you choose on the basis of criteria that I believe are ultimately aesthetic or ethical, not scientific, when it comes to history. You don't have a choice among different versions of aeronautics when it comes to building an airplane that will fly or not, right? But it seems to me that we become interested in history out of needs rather than intellectual interests or curiosity, and we write history out of needs that are more particularly ethical than scientific. It would hardly matter what we knew or didn't know about the past in terms of any possible science of society. I don't think you can build a science of society on the basis of study of the past anyway. What you're concerned with usually is group identity and the relationship of selves to the group identity, and I think that's the function of historical writing. It's to provide in Foucault's term "genealogies" and group practices and things of that sort. And you choose those, I mean, in more or less open societies you have choices here.

You are in a situation now where your daughter in some sense has to decide—and this is a very postmodern thing—whether she's going to be a British subject, an American citizen, a French citizen, right, all the above, or none. Isn't it true? It's very interesting. And it is not a genetically-determined decision. It's a distinctively social, cultural decision. All of this has to do with the choice of a past, you see, from which she will have wished to have descended. That is Nietzsche's formulation. Nietzsche says the difference between historical self-consciousness and mere genetics—a genealogical self-consciousness—is that you choose a past from which you would have wished to have descended rather than the past from which you have actually descended. And you know your daughter will be doing that in terms of national identity. As a matter of fact, when she grows up, she may very well be in a situation where a choice of a national identity will seem kind of absurd. She may have a European passport, not a British, American, so forth... But you see, that again is to choose a different history.

As regards the question of national identity, I want to ask you about your current work. I understand that you are interested at the moment in the former eastern bloc and the way in which history is being rewritten after the fall of the Wall.

Yes, that's a very interesting phenomenon. It has to do with reinventing the immediate past rather than a kind of long *durée*. People like the Ukrainians are told, "Okay, you're a nation now, go and write your own history." They have been told all this time that they didn't have a history that was separate from that of Russia. You recall that Stalin even got rid of Ukrainian as a language or tried to destroy it, substituting Russian. And now these people have got to decide, well, what happened the last 75 years? Exactly the same thing that's happening in the Soviet Union itself, in which for 75 years the

Stalinists sort of told people, "Forget anything that happened up to the Revolution." There's a complete discontinuity between that period and what's going to happen from now on. Now they're opening up the archives, and historians are saying, We realize we lied, but now we're going to tell the *truth*. They're selling off the archives to these American historical entrepreneurs who are gathering and buying up the archives that are being sold because the libraries need the money. Certain of these American historical entrepreneurs who want to gain control of the Russian past have hired out-of-work Russian scholars to go into the archives to copy materials, send them over to Harvard or the Hoover Institution at Stanford or what-have-you, and these people are now setting up their own version, not only of the historical record, but of the archives themselves. So this is going on in all of the nations of the eastern bloc. It was brought to my attention by an Oxford scholar named Catherine Merridale.

Another, Carolyn Steedman, is interested in the whole question of why we do history, looking for a subject, Latvian memory and narrative. Here are the Latvians. What kind of historical memory do Latvians have after 75 years of being assimilated to the Stalinist system? So she's interviewing a guy who's been to many prisons and many prison camps and whose experience of what it means to be a Lett extended only to about the age of 17 or 18 when he was picked up first of all by the Russian police and then sent around to all these camps, and so the last 20 years or so were all spent there. So what kind of history does he have? No community except these camps. This guy is trying to reconstruct his Latvian identity under these circumstances. He speaks a language that no oral historian speaks, right? It's really fascinating stuff: the attempt after all by the various regimes, like in China, as in the eastern bloc, to control consciousness, to engineer consciousness. Now of course the Americans all say, "We're not like that," see, "We're not engineering consciousness. We're just telling it like it is." So they're going in there now and they're trying to take over and define for the Russians how they *should* think of history. And of course how they should think of history is exactly the way in which *these* people were thinking about history during the Cold War on this side.

So, for Western historians there's still no historicizing, no theorizing of their own position?

You see, I think that history in the 19th century was established as the foundational discourse in place of both theology and metaphysics as something that was a neutral ground of fact that you could always have recourse to when debates of an ideological nature seemed resolvable by an appeal to the facts, you know, bring in history without having to think very much about it. Result is that historians grew up believing typically that you

didn't have to think very much about epistemological issues or even ideological issues as long as you had the chastity of pursuit of the fact as an end in itself. But it is an interesting development that even in Great Britain, which is against theory, which is against philosophy, you know... these issues are all coming back. They're connected with questions of communal identity, national identity, the whole debate that's going on now, should Britain be in the European Community, lose its individuality, become a log among a bunch of logs? The high school teachers are debating these issues in *The Times Educational Supplement*.

... that education is in crisis because of the national identity issue?

That's right, as it is everywhere. And part of it has to do with the fact that our sense of our historical belonging and so forth is in crisis too. Because the nation-state's gone. And that was the basic unit for understanding historical reality. And it doesn't count any more. Economic factors, communicational factors, and so forth... these are what count. Nowadays there isn't a definition of what community you belong to. There are people who belong to communities on the Web that are more meaningful to them than their status as citizens of the United States.

So they belong to "virtual communities"?

Yes, they are virtual communities. And maybe that's all we ever had anyway. Even the family is a virtual community as far as I'm concerned... [Laughter]. Isn't that true? Is that why we never felt we belonged to a community? I mean... only *other* people seemed to belong to communities.

I think you have hit on a definition of postmodernity right there, because if these things were always a fiction, then the only difference now is the undeniable evidence of their fictionality or "virtuality." You know, all that emphasis on the image in the postmodern. Something that maybe always existed only in this fictional way has become so obviously "virtual" now that it simply can be accepted as such. One simply has to accept it as image.

Yes, that's a very interesting idea. That may be what postmodernism is. You're right about that, that it was always virtual. You see, every community is always virtual. Now they take it for granted—that's all it is. What does it mean to be a good parent? It means to play the role of being a parent. It means playing that virtual reality role, it doesn't mean *being* a good parent.

You were telling me that there was recently a conference in New York, a retrospective devoted entirely to your work.

I don't believe in these kind of retrospective things and of course predictably, people were raising questions about *Metahistory*, which I always point out is now 25 years old and doesn't even interest *me* any more. I can't remember what I wrote. But it's very interesting that these were all historians but they didn't historicize the work at all. I mean, my response is, "Look, it was written 25 years ago at a particular moment, the moment of structuralism, and it's a structural analysis of historical writing, what's so strange about that?" I wouldn't do it *now* that way. It's interesting that whenever I go anywhere I'm invited to lecture, they want me to talk about *Metahistory*. And I say, "Look, I'm doing other things now." This is exactly what happened in New York. These were historians, and I said, "Well, look, you're historians, before you criticize the work, why wouldn't you set it in its context? Don't act like it's been raised out of time and you're dealing with timeless issues and so forth. That may be the effect of a structuralist analysis."

This is what offended many historians. They said, "We don't need theory, we don't deal with theory, we just go and study the sources and say what we've found." And that's true. That's what makes historical conferences so bloody dull. Because all they're doing is presenting their findings, and so what's to discuss? This guy says "I found out about the Renaissance that there was a great deal more homosexuality than previously thought and here's my evidence." Someone else says, "Oh, I found the same thing in France in a similar period." So what's to debate, you know?

