

The Practical Past and Related Issues

An Interview with Hayden White

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In recent decades, historical theoreticians around the world have been passionately debating the limits of representation. The idea of representation is the basis of postmodern historical theory, and its status as an overall framework for how to discuss the relationship to the past by introducing psychological and emotional ways of relating to past events also rearranges how we deal with and live with the past. If the past is not absent in the way the idea of representation asserts, it affects how we think about the relationship to the past and the histories we make to give meaning to that relationship.¹ There is thus a strong interest in contemporary theory in analysing the relationship to the past as a question of ethics where, for instance, our psychological and emotional reactions could be made an expression. Viewed from the perspective of ethics, the way we relate to the past signifies not only how we remember people who once lived, but also how we, with the aid of the knowledge we attain from studying their lives and worlds, choose to live in the present.

Several of these problems inform Hayden White's idea of the practical past, which is the main theme in his latest collection of essays. The practical past is his response to the challenges put to the theory of representation in recent decades. White defines the practical past based on an analytical distinction borrowed from the philosopher Michael Oakeshott between the practical and the historical past, where the historical past refers to the kind of past that interests historians, whereas the practical past deals with the way we generally use the past to orient ourselves in the world. The idea is that an analysis of the practical past makes it possible to see history as 'an ethical discourse, rather than as a science.'² Looked upon this way, history could turn into a living force for change instead of being written for the purpose of interscientific debate. As a matter of fact, outside academic historical sciences, the past is, according to White, very much a practical

enterprise. But pinning down the idea of the practical past is not easy. It has to do with our habits of thinking and the tacit knowledge we draw upon whenever we handle everyday dilemmas and situations. As such, it answers the moral question ‘What ought I (we) do?’

We call upon the practical past of memory, dream, fantasy, experience, and imagination when confronted with the question: ‘What ought I (or we) do?’ The historical past cannot help us here, because the most it can tell us is what people in *other* times, places, and circumstances did in their situation at *that* time and place. This information contains no warrant for deducing what we, in our situation, in our time and our place, *should* do in order to conform to the standard set by that categorical imperative which licenses our belief in the possibility of morality itself.³

Construed in this way, the practical past is everything we can think of except the kind of knowledge we acquire from scientific history. White’s words also reveal that he separates past from present. The gulf between past and present is insurmountable, or at least of such a magnitude that circumstances and decisions made in a past world no longer guide us in the present. At the same time, it is unclear how a categorical imperative can be reconciled to this division between worlds. Is it not in the character of a categorical imperative that it is always and everywhere valid? So can the moral question ‘What ought I (we) to do?’ be answered by the practical past?

The separation of a practical and a historical past was one of the things I could not agree with in a review of White’s book.⁴ I would argue that downgrading the historical past has ethical implications, since one can see the historical past as the past of the victims, serfs, and undistinguished men and women who, from an ethical point of view, might deserve to be included in an ethically informed history (or historical consciousness). I also focused on White’s critique of identity. He doubts, correctly I believe, the idea of identity as a substance or a stable centre, but neglects to critically examine the ways in which a practical past, as presented by him, also establishes and upholds identities. Despite my repeated readings of White’s book, or perhaps because of them, I was haunted by the thought that I had misunderstood his general points. I therefore contacted White to ask whether he would like to respond to some of the thorniest questions. It was my great good fortune that he agreed to do so, and before addressing my questions directly, he also wrote a ‘preface’ in which he formulated some general reflections on the state of history today.

My reading of White puts him at the point Michael S. Roth identified when he remarked that history is ultimately written ‘in the service of either

freedom or piety'.⁵ If we use Roth's distinction, White ends up on the side of freedom at the expense of piety as an ethical virtue or care for the lost and dead. Such an interpretation accords with that of White's readers, such as Herman Paul and Ewa Domanska, who have recently argued that White's 'liberation historiography' tries to contribute to the emancipation of repressed groups in the present and to liberate us from dogmatic systems.⁶ And among these systems White includes professional historical science.

White's electronic responses to my e-mailed questions contribute to a better understanding of the meaning of the practical past and how his latest reflections on the problems of history and historical writing can be read. But, nevertheless, there are dilemmas not solved by White but rather opened up by his ideas. The existential use of the past and the stories we tell to solve the needs of the present, to orient ourselves in the world or give legitimacy to our actions, is mostly an individual enterprise. Using the past to find alternatives to the current world order as understood by different groups is another. Ultimately, the question is how all the different kinds of practical uses of the past – the multitude of which is part of the richness of our culture – are aggregated to become histories that we collectively tell about ourselves as members of society, and how they appear responsible and fair. Irrespective of the complications attached to the idea of responsible history,⁷ at least we seem to expect it to embody attitudes such as *Sachlichkeit*, neutrality, or impartiality, or, if we prefer a more ethically charged word, virtuousness.

Questions and Answers

Hayden White: These are good and thoughtful reflections and it pleases me that my work may have in some part inspired them, since I regard progress in intellectual work to be measured by the new kinds of questions raised about the fundamental relations between homo sapiens and the world it has arisen from and defines itself in terms of its differences from that world.

'History' as it has developed in the West and spread globally with the expansion of technological capitalism, has come to occupy the place in human culture and exercise some of the functions of religion, myth, metaphysics, transcendental authority (in the Latin sense of *auctoritas*), tradition, convention, and so on – as, in short, an world-immanent evolutionary process in which humanity assumes a central role – as agent and agency – in the determination of the aim and purpose of its species-being.

The profession of historical studies seeks to scientise study of the past – which means removing from historical inquiry any such 'philosophising' concepts as first and final causes, large scale temporalities and spatialities,

and speculation about possible futures. In many societies but especially in Western industrialised, capitalistic nation-states, professional historiography has succeeded in identifying 'the past' with 'history' so that it becomes difficult for anyone interested in 'the past' (or 'pastness') to avoid approaching this object of study in any way other than as 'history.'

At the same time, historians' conceptions of both the historical object (referents or contents) and of the evidence to be used for their proper investigation exclude large areas of the past from a proper historiological treatment. Any effort to comprehend the past and represent it in other modes (mythological, artistic, 'philosophical', poetic, and so on) must pass (and always fail) the 'reality-test' of 'factuality' which serves as history's organon and orthodoxy. Thus, accounts of 'the past' based on memory, tradition, oral statements, poetic or any other kind of 'imaginative' methodology are ruled out of court as fiction, fantasy, or lie.

But the past of memory and memory traces, of imagination, feeling and affect, of conditioning and tradition, these are the principal resources for the individual's sense of an identity, for an existential validation of its relation to the world, its preparation for action, and the confidence in its capacity for decision and action in situations of crisis. History – and this time I mean historical accounts of the past – bears no existentially significant relationship to an individual's sense of self or the situation in which he or she is called upon to act in life-significant ways. And this is true even of historical biographies. What significance could the life of Napoleon, Joan of Arc, Abraham Lincoln or any other individual considered significant enough to warrant the composition of his or her lifestory, have for anyone other than the determination of the ways in which their lives differed from mine and the distance between their situations and any by which I might find myself seized? Even a psychoanalytical exercise – as unscientific as it may be – would be more relevant to my efforts to prepare myself for action in ordinary circumstances than any properly 'history of my life' could possibly be.

And yet my problem, as a finite individual member of a group or even alone on a desert island, is always and with greater or lesser degrees of anguish to know what to do, when and how to act – and with a sufficient degree of confidence to sustain me as an individual even in the event of failure. History cannot help me.

Failing a religious revelation of some kind, I need the past and some kind of 'take' on my grounding in it sufficient to the requirements of decision-making and choosing among alternatives in ordinary, practical life. Fortunately, I have such resources in a host of practical disciplines and kinds of experiences that offer hope of a capacity to act even when the odds against a successful outcome for any given action are nil.

By any criterion of realism, a ‘history’ of a given event or set of events cast in the form of a story is a product of fantasy, as mythological in form and content as any of those stories told by fabulists, epic poets, or balladeers of times past, and which modern historical studies were supposed to supplant by truth, fact, and common sense. For narrative cannot but idealise (or demonise) the events, agents, agencies, and scenes it presents, because that is what ‘stories’ do, i.e., they turn situations into scenes, people into ‘characters,’ and events into opportunities for (or blockages to) action. All the above by way of preface. Now to your questions.

Torbjörn Gustafsson Chorell: Why do you need this distinction when you say, following Oakeshott, that there is a third kind of past, ‘a constantly changing whole or totality’ (p. xiii)? Could it not be argued that however we relate to the past or which parts of it we select, we do it out of some need or interest, even if that ultimately is only an antiquarian desire to preserve things as they are? In short, is not any kind of constructed past ultimately practical?

HW: Yes, any kind of constructed past can be put to practical use, but recall that, according to the doxa of professional historiography, historical inquiry is supposed to be value-neutral, ‘objective’, and undertaken ‘for itself alone’ rather than for some ulterior purpose. This is what is supposed to distinguish it from ‘ideology’. Of course, everyone knows that this idea of an ideology-free historiography was launched on behalf of and with the purpose of providing a genealogy for the ‘peoples’ being brought under the discipline of the emergent ‘nation-states’ of the nineteenth century. This has the effect of dividing the past into two sections, one made up of peoples organized as nation-states and therefore having a history and the other made up of ‘nature’ on the one hand and inferior, because history-less tribes, barbarians, primitives, etc., on the other. It was important for historians to maintain that the order and structure of ‘history’ was found in the evidence, not constructed out of the evidence. Of course, other ‘real’ civilisations, in India, China, Mesopotamia, were allowed to have pasts and even to have the kinds of history that Western historians could provide them. But they were all considered to be lacking in historical consciousness, invented in the ‘West’ in ancient Greece.

TGC: The practical past is, thus, a vital aspect of an ethical outlook. I would like to understand how you view responsibility and propriety in relation to this. Responsibility and propriety [are] not the same thing, of course, but also seem entwined. When commenting upon responsibility, you sometimes

explicitly, but mostly implicitly, invoke asceticism: there are temptations to be resisted; there are things that especially historians are not allowed to do, etc. At the same time, you constantly undermine this common sense with examples from our historical culture's diverse approaches to and uses of the past. Could you enlighten me at all on this? What does a responsible approach to the past consist of? Or is approaching the past only a matter of taste?

HW: A discipline in the human sciences primarily has the purpose of identifying error in received accounts of a given thing or period, analyzing the current state of things, and then providing some kind of therapy – such as, for example, the New Deal. Since history does not utilize the experimental method used in the natural sciences for the testing of hypotheses, its method consists in knowing what not to do, what to avoid, which moves not to make in the construction of an object no longer perceivable. This is the function of models in historical method. Training consists of studying and imitating the 'methods' of works recognised by other historians as playing by the rules of the game. The 'rules' (which tell you what not to do) have to be modified every time a new object is grasped as treatable by historical methods. The rules are different in political history from what they are in history of science, history of art, history of economies, and so on. This is why narrative is so important in historiography – much more than it is in the natural sciences. Narrative allows one to demonstrate how changes in the object of study necessitate new rules for the object's historicisation.

Then you ask, 'What does a responsible approach to the past consist of?' This is a metaphysical and more specifically an ontological question. Recall that, for Kant, time was not a possible object of study but (along with space) a mode of perception. You cannot observe yourself observing or perceive yourself perceiving while you are perceiving. Now, the historical object is by definition an object which either exists in the past or came into existence in a past. When I divide time into past, present, and future – what Vico called 'sect(ion)s' of time – I am either fiddling with temporality or dividing it in such a way as to beg a whole set of questions about where one section begins and the other ends, how we are to treat objects belonging to one or another of these sections, and what are the characteristic markers of the three 'sections'. It makes no sense to say that I have responsibilities to time and therefore none to any of its sects.

It is another matter with respect to the objects supposed to belong *naturaliter* to them. Vico held that civilization is founded on three institutions: burial of the dead, marriage and family, and taking of the auguries (institutions seeking to know and control the future). On this view, the past is the realm of the dead, and as such a place populated by objects to which the living

have an obligation of reverence and respect. Does history, considered as the scientific *study* of this place and the objects populating it, have any specific duties, epistemic, ethical, or legal, to these?

From the beginning, history, like epic art, made a distinction between those things of the past worthy of having a story told about them and those unworthy of this honor. Unlike respect for the dead in general, historiological respect appears to be highly discriminatory in what it regards as worthy of its attention. The *Iliad* had no time or space for the depiction of commonfolk and their doings, and history was conventionally a cluster of stories about different in-groups and determination of what made one in-group not only different from, but superior to, others. If nothing human is alien to the historian, then any history purporting to demonstrate a qualitative superiority of one group over another would be a violation of a moral principle. Ewa Domanska and Herman Paul, among others, have recently taken up the issue of 'virtue epistemologies' with respect to history. Increasingly, there is a tendency to add to the historian's love of truth and respect for fact the virtues of sincerity and seriousness. These canonical virtues imply, moreover, a commitment to literalness in enunciation and eschewal of any kind of poeticity in grammar and syntax. All of which adds up to a rejection of any kind of rhetoricity or utterance for (expression of) affect. It also adds up to an ethics of expression that identifies art with artifice and artificiality.

TGC: Regarding the idea of the practical past, as distinct from the historical past, is it even possible to speak of *historical* value? And if the practical past is not about historical value, or historically valuable experiences or events, what kinds of values are being promoted by the practical past?

HW: The practical past is a past which manifestly engages us as a possible resource for a propaedeutic for action in the present. It is a past that is personal, but not necessarily either subjective or objective, and is studied as an aid to a possible answer to the question 'What should I do?'. It requires as much imagination and art as it does scientific knowledge and rational consciousness.

TGC: Focusing on 'the practical past' always seems to narrow things down to a very recent past or the past of living generations since no one has experiences of 'historical times'. Do you see this shortening of 'history' to a recent past or generational past as a problem? Or is it the price we pay for giving up notions of tradition, continuity, even 'history' itself, the origin of which gets lost in myth?

HW: For Herodotus and Thucydides, the recent past was the only thing a historian could study, because both depended upon accounts by living witnesses of events (in Thucydides' case, he was a participant, as a general). The remote past was supposed to be studiable by archeologists (*archeologoi*). Later, when historians started depending on written records, they changed the past they could study to that part of it attestable by written records. As far as I am concerned, the past that is important is the recent past. Foucault says: many historians are interested in the history of the past; I am interested in the history of the present.

TGC: In your analyses you often return to the question of truth as correspondence and/or coherence. When you conclude 'Contextualism and Historical Understanding' (p. 71) with the statement that 'the truth of a description of anything considered to have existed in the past or in history is *symbolic* truth', isn't this just another way of saying that it works because people share a system of symbols to give past events meaning and value? And is a figurative and tropical, 'poetical', way of connecting things to a context – and thus the writing of history – basically a pragmatic procedure?

HW: When you say, re the idea of symbolic truth, 'isn't this just another way of saying that it works because people share a system of symbols to give past events meaning and value?' Yes, seems so to me. But symbols are culture-specific, on the one hand, and cultures – especially modern cultures – are multiplex. My point was, I think, that past events and things are subject to revision as to their 'meanings' because they are past and no longer subject to verification or disconfirmation by direct inspection. One way of looking at historical events and things is to ask 'What is the proper name of this event?' You can only answer that question by placing the event or thing within a plausible thematization in a narrative – 'Is it a revolt?' 'No, Sire, it is a revolution.'

TGC: You oppose identity as an essence or a substance remaining unchanged, and you say this kind of identity is an illusion. I have no problem with this, but I do not agree with your assertion that it is the prime concern of history writing to promote such an unchanged substance (in one way or another). So my question is: Why is it important to dissolve the second identity-problem? Is this not a battle already won, at least among those who try to think historically? Is it not identity as a social form that is the real challenge since these kinds of identities are also supported by 'history' and how we relate to the past?

HW: Yes, I agree with you, identity is a problem for states with multivaried populations. They can no longer invoke the spirit of the ancestors as the basis of a people's unity. Any true history of any modern society would have to show how the identity question has been dissolved by the movement of peoples since the second World War until today. Group 'identity' has been dissolved by events. So history can no longer contribute to the myth of 'the spirit of the people' or 'the American way of life'. Hobbes said that the state had two resources for the welding of a motley crowd into a people: force and persuasion. When persuasion fails, force is increased. Persuasion then becomes used to justify the state's use of force against its own people. History's use in justification of belief in the spiritual unity of a people remains valid only for so long: until the colony begins to turn into an empire by conquest of what was originally the host peoples. The Romans solved the problem of assimilation of alien peoples by substituting the law for 'the state'.

That ruse lasted until Augustus. After that, Roman historiography had one problem: how to demonstrate the (alleged) continuity between the Republic and the Empire. New symbols were needed: whence the Aeneid, Livy, etc.

TGC: You say that you have been interested in the relationship between history and literature ever since you first became 'fascinated by history'. You also write that you learned from William J. Bossenbrook that 'history itself must remain a mystery'. What is it that makes you return to this dilemma? What does the problem of history/literature signify in our culture?

HW: It signifies the massification of culture, the decline of elite culture, an elite literature, art, and so on. Modernist literature takes this decline (which includes 'language' as well) as its subject-matter – which is why the mass reading public rejects modernism and clutters the market with action-lit, chick-lit, porn, special effects (vampires, ghosts, etc.) stuff, and so on. I discovered that since history was not and could never become a science (and remain recognizable as history); it needs a support for its claims to being a kind of knowledge. Thus, from being considered a part of belles-lettres (up to the end of the eighteenth century), history turned against 'literature' as its antithetical term, identifying it with 'fiction'.

Endnotes

- 1 Aleida Assman, *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen? Aufstieg und Fall des Zeitregimes der Moderne*, Munich 2013; Francois Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: présentisme et expérience du temps*, Paris 2003; *Breaking Up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future*, Chris Lorenz & Berber Bevernage (eds.), Göttingen 2013.
- 2 Hayden White, *The Practical Past*, Evanston 2014, p. 13.
- 3 White 2014, p. 10.
- 4 Torbjörn Gustafsson Chorell, "History and Identity in Hayden White's *The Practical Past*", *History of the Human Sciences*, 2016:1, pp. 128–35.
- 5 Michael S. Roth, *Memory, Trauma, and History. Essays on Living with the Past*, New York 2012, p. 85.
- 6 Herman Paul, *Hayden White. The Historical Imagination*, London 2011, ch. 2; Ewa Domanska, "Hayden White and Liberation Historiography", *Rethinking History*, 2015:4, pp. 640–50.
- 7 Antoon de Baets, *Responsible History*, New York 2009.