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The Contemporary ‘Linguistic Turn’ and Historical Knowledge

In this subchapter, I will not expose the Western controversy called ‘Linguistic Turn’, but I will present my point of view concerning some ideas about this intellectual phenomenon and the identity of written history. As I presented in this study, there are at least three ‘linguistic turns’ in Western civilization!

Wittgenstein’s and Saussure’s impact on social sciences has made from language a Centre of Attention in the Western intellectual world. This ‘linguistic turn’ proclaims the importance and, according to some thinkers, “the hegemony” of language not only as a structuring agent, but also as a main condition to express something. For the American philosopher Richard Rorty, the ‘linguistic turn’ is simultaneously, the attention attributed by Wittgenstein and Saussure to the idea of language and the impact of language upon human activities and sciences. In 1967, Rorty edited *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* without foreseeing that this expression would be the focus of the last quarter of the 20th century in Western academic world.

For Wittgenstein, the words and the propositions are considered facts, probably, mental facts. He wished to treat language as *a logical system of mental representations* corresponding to reality! To identify history with language is one of the effects of the contemporary ‘Linguistic Turn’. The German historian of concepts, R. Koselleck specified that history cannot be reduced to the act of speaking¹ in spite of using it.

Ferdinand de Saussure made out of language an autonomous field of research. The language is not anymore only a mean of expression, but it is a discipline itself, that “operates according to its own rules and is quite unrelated to the ‘real world’, past or present”². This point of view opened the gate of illusions for the third time in Western civilization. The illusions are: 1) words are signs; 2) the spoken and the written words are interpreted by the relation between *the signifier* (the word) and *the signified* (the concept that represents the word). This game of illusion between *signifier* and *signified* has a major impact upon historical knowledge.

¹ R. Koselleck, *op. cit.*, p. 13

² A. Munslow, *op. cit.*, p. 28

From Saussure's and Wittgenstein's points of view, these directions of exploring the language have influenced the perception of many contemporary thinkers and have also had a great impact on the idea of writing. 'Our world' and 'our representations' are conditioned by language, in spite of the fact that human relationships are based on prelinguistic or metahistorical conditions. In other words, not every action or fact is said by 'words'. We will always have a historical world beyond languages!

The American philosopher, cultural critic and medievalist historian Hayden White (b. 1928) is an example of thinker influenced by Wittgenstein's and Saussure's impact on knowledge. He regards written history as "a linguistic and poetic act"³ (*Metahistory*). He considers history a literary artefact and he thinks that "the past exists for us only as it is written up by historians"⁴. This is a reductive point of view, maybe pragmatic, probably conceived on the idea that in this world, only what can be seen or verified does exist. White does not take into consideration the first instance of history, that of *history as living*. We all know that history is *a living phenomenon* and *a written one*. We have two instances: history-lived and written history!

In H. White's criticism to history, it is not easy to depict his pertinent and constructive thoughts from his illusionist ideas, because he operates with some ambiguous concepts such as 'troping process', 'emplotment' and because he interprets the historians' works from the perspective of literary genres (comedy, drama, tragedy) and of literary notions (satiric, comic, tragic, ironic, romantic, metaphoric etc.).

One of the great merits of H. White's work is that of producing many interpretative possibilities of exploring the Past. For example, *the troping process* (from metonymy to metaphor and synecdoche and finally to irony) is a way of "turning or steering the description of an object, event or person away from one meaning, so as to wring out further different and possibly even multiple, meanings"⁵. We have a proliferation of meanings! We can confer a plurality of meanings to a subject or to a concept and these meanings change our perceptions concerning the relations between reality and discourses, but the historical reality remains the same.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 71

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 33

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 11

In my opinion, H. White's troping process is not a problem of how historians write about Past, but it is a problem of how people read and regard the historical texts. Alun Munslow explicitly illustrated an example of the troping process referring to F. J. Turner's history of the American frontier: "Read as a metaphor, 'free land' is defined as 'the line of most rapid Americanisation'. If read as a metonym, Americanisation is reduced to its most significant part, namely the existence of 'free land'. If read as a synecdoche, 'free land' signifies the essence of Americanisation. If read ironically, 'free land' stated as the literal truth of the Americanisation process, would be negated by the context created by the historian that there was none and Americanisation thus never occurred"⁶. These modalities of interpreting 'free land' are four types of making and reading a historical text. The philosophers can transform history into an ideology for some purposes. But history is not about interpretations, meanings, preconceived ideas and rhetorical constructions. History is created by human facts and these facts make history to be *a particular human science*, which is different from other human sciences.

History exists as a living state of things without our texts. We write history only to preserve and to have something concrete. What the philosophers call 'the Americanisation process' we can express in simple propositions corresponding to the historical facts such as 'The European settlers conquered the territories of the Indian tribes from America'. And we have a chronology and the factual evidence of how this conquest was done. I think that it is important for written history to remain on the territory of facts and not to invent bizarre interpretations. History is not hermeneutics. History is not semiotics.

When Hayden White started to publish essays about historiography, in Europe and, particularly, in France the intellectual movement was greatly influenced by structuralism. The legendary Claude Levi-Strauss – father of structuralism – was 'haunted' by Saussure's linguistic model in his anthropology⁷. Kerwin Lee Klein said that H. White was "another thinker who found much to admire in Levi-Strauss's injunctions against history"⁸. When Hayden White published *Metahistory* (1973), the Western intellectual world was in full 'linguistic turn'. Roland Barthes considered that

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 156

⁷ F. Furet, *L'Atelier de L'Histoire*, trans. by Irina Cristea, Bucharest, 2002, p. 54

⁸ K. Lee Klein, *In Search of Narrative Mastery: Postmodernism and People Without History in History and Theory (HT)*, No. 4, 1995, p. 280

“the fact [the evidence] can only have a linguistic existence were merely the ‘copy’ of another existence is situated in the domain of the ‘real’”⁹.

Ladurie showed in his *The Mind and the Method of the Historian* (1973) that the interest of historian consists not in words, but in what is beyond the words! This is a *natural law*, a *historical law* that splits the historians from other social scientists... History is a construction *with* words, but it is not only the existence of words!

R. Barthes and H. White have correctly asserted “that historiography does not differ from fiction, but is a form of it”¹⁰, because we have an insurmountable distance between *lived experiences* and *written word*. We cannot have the false pretension that we recreate the exactly historical past or that we describe the historical facts with precise methods. The Romanian novelist Camil Petrescu used to say that *every written word is a mystification* from the perspective of authenticity. This ‘mystification’ must be understood as figurative function which interposes between *real experiences* and *written word*. We cannot tell *What was it?* or *What did it happen?* only by making use of this ‘mystification’, this ‘figurative function’ of written word. Without this figurative function, we cannot have aesthetics and imaginary as means of expression. But this ‘fictive historiography’ deals with real people, real problems, real actions and facts and we don’t have *marvellous aptitudes* to invent all these (people, problems, actions, facts). From this perspective, historiography can be understood as a fictive discourse with real elements, a fictive discourse which speaks realities!

I think that the actions and the activities of people, which many of them are unrecorded by institutions or historians, are part of *historical living process* and the Past and the History exist without historians. In my view, written history is only a part of History, but not *the whole History*. There are people and people with their own stories, with their own hi-stories, unknown by historians. They and their histories exist without the activity of all historians.

Before White started his polemic in Western historiography, in 1971, Paul Veyne proclaimed: “History did not exists and the historical facts are not scientific”¹¹. But if history did not exist, how could the ‘historical facts’ be possible? In the second part of his erudite and phenomenological study *Comment on écrit l’histoire: Essai d’epistémologie*, Paul Veyne entitled the chapter 6 – *The Understanding of Intrigue*,

⁹ K. Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, London/New York, Routledge, 1991, p. 50

¹⁰ G. Iggers, *op. cit.*, p. 118

¹¹ Paul Veyne, *op. cit.*, p. 40

where he emphasized that there are many similarities between novel and the book of history.

In Paul Ricoeur's (1913-2005) vision, the searching for truth means "elongating between the finitude of 'formulating questions' and that of opening 'to exist'"¹². All these critical and philosophical debates concerning 'the truth' and 'the real' in history are complete waste of time. In reality, we do not have 'a final truth'¹³. The truth is inextricably linked by people's actions and facts. The words are only 'copies' of historical reality.

It is no doubt that H. White analyzes and interprets the historical books from the perspective of literary heritage. He admits that "we only think as situations as tragic or comic because these concepts are part of our generally cultural and specifically literary heritage"¹⁴. But in real life, we have many situations which are sad or humorous and can be considered 'tragic' and 'comic'. For example, the assassination of the archduchess Franz Ferdinand was a tragic moment. White borrowed from the English novelist Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970) the concept of 'plot'. For White, 'a plot' is not only a simple story, but it is also a story accompanied by intrigue and causality.

Allan Megill explains us the distinction between 'a story' and 'a plot'. A story is "a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence"¹⁵ such as: *The king died and then the queen died*¹⁶. A plot is "a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality"¹⁷ such as: *The king died and then the queen died of grief*¹⁸. The concept of 'plot' "entails not just that the past has an author, but implies also the occurrence of a prior storytelling"¹⁹. For Andrew P. Norman, the word 'plot' is equivalent with 'narrative structure' and "appears for the first time, if not exclusively, in the realm of discourse"²⁰ and "like grammar, is a structure that belongs to discursive entities. The

¹² P. Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, trans. by E. Niculescu, Bucharest, Anastasia, 1996, p. 64

¹³ Ewa Domanska, *Hayden White: Beyond Irony*, *HT*, vol. 37, No. 2, 1998, p. 178

¹⁴ H. White, *Tropic of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1978, p. 85

¹⁵ A. Megill, *Recounting the Past: Description, Explanation and Narrative in Historiography* in *American Historical Review (AHR)*, Vol. 94, 1989, p. 629

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 629

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 629

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 629

¹⁹ A. P. Norman, *Telling It Like It Was: Historical Narratives on Their Own Terms*, *HT*, Vol. 30, 1991, p. 126

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 127

past, like the sky, is not a discursive entity”²¹. But in Hayden White’s vision, the Past is a *discursive* entity, although he criticizes the idea of narrative: “Most of those who defend narrative as a legitimate mode of historical representation and even as a valid mode of explanation (at least, for history) stress the communicative function”²² maybe because he has a ‘spectacular’ conception concerning the function of narrative which is “not to ‘represent’, it is to constitute a spectacle... Narrative does not show, does not imitate”²³. A. Munslow considered that “narrative explanation is quite unlike the constructionist version of historical change based on the belief in a functioning deterministic or causal law(s)”²⁴. In the 20th century, the narrative school of history made from written history ‘a linguistic and poetic act’. But history as a discipline is more than ‘story’, ‘plot’ or ‘dynamical representations’ of what people have done in the past. History is a social phenomenon and there is no man in this world entirely detached from history!

It is understood that “narrative connectives used in historical writing are figurative”²⁵. We cannot have the pretension that we reproduce the historical reality. After all, writing is a figurative form of expression in the same way as painting or music. But history is not only a way of using the language²⁶ as Michael Stanford said in his *The Nature of Historical Knowledge*, because **history is a way of using the reality and a mode of knowing the reality due to the facts and the personal experiences**. We do not speak for the sake of speaking, but for expressing something. In the same way, the historians do not write for the sake of writing, but for communicating something.

In Hayden White’s conception, the interpretation is what the historian regards as a true story and his narration is “a representation of what he took to be the real story”²⁷. He also rejects the idea of ‘covering laws’ and the idea of demonstration. He considers that “history must be rhetorical, never ‘logical demonstration’”²⁸. Sometimes we use demonstrations, but not for the sake of demonstrations; we accept

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 127

²² H. White, *The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory*, *HT*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1984, p. 17

²³ H. White, *The Content of the Form*, Baltimore, 1987, p. 35

²⁴ A. Munslow, *op. cit.*, p. 118

²⁵ N. Carroll, *Tropology and Narration*, *HT*, No. 3, 2000, p. 401

²⁶ M. Stanford, *The Nature of Historical Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 130

²⁷ H. White, *The Question...*, *op. cit.*, p. 3

²⁸ A. Marwick, *Two Approaches to Historical Study: The Metaphysical (Including ‘Postmodernism’) and the Historical*, *Journal of Contemporary History (JCH)*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1995, p. 19

demonstrations, in order to clarify what happened into an unclear moment of History. For historical knowledge, the demonstrations or logical constructions for the sake of themselves are worthless.

Hayden White has a literary point of view in the foundation of historical knowledge. He considers that the way in which the historian describes his subject is more important than to analyze evidence with the explanatory and referential mechanism such as *collection, colligation, comparison* and *verification*.

The 'plot' is in White's attention, because he regards history as a literary artefact. White treats a book of history from the point of view of a literary critic, analyzing the text, the epic, the poetry, the expressivity, the meaning a. s. o. But these are forms not contents and **these figurative forms cannot produce the content of history**. He treats the historical discourse as *an apparatus* for the production of meaning²⁹. From this point of view, we can show the limits of discourses as modalities of expressing the historical past. Because the discourses imply *an articulate way of communicating ideas* by narration or by commentary, they can easily be distorted and used for certain purposes. We don't want that histories to be reduced to *a game of words, or statements, or a game of demonstrations*, where the so-called 'truth' is an expression of the modern knowledge-power.

The 'plot' and the 'trope' have epistemic functions only in analyzing the formal part of historical writing. The concept of 'metahistory' has much more epistemic function and White told us that "could be taken to describe inquiry into the presuppositions necessary for belief in a disciplined mode of historical thinking, including the study of the relations obtaining between the scientific study of history, on the one hand, and the rest of the human and social sciences (such as anthropology, sociology, psychology and yes, even philosophy, literary theory and linguistic) on the other"³⁰. He explained to Arthur Marwick (1936-2006) that the concept of 'metahistory' "was used by R. G. Collingwood to refer to what philosophers used to call 'material philosophy of history', that is to say, works like those of Hegel, Marx and Spengler which purported to reveal the purpose, end, plan or pattern of world history and, in some cases, predict the future"³¹. Hayden White specified that the book

²⁹ A. Munslow, *op. cit.*, p. 66

³⁰ H. White, *Response to Arthur Marwick*, *JCH*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 1995, p. 233

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 245, note 1

Metahistory “was a study of the phenomenon in the nineteenth century, not an advocacy of a ‘metahistorical’ approach to the study of history”³².

Today, we can speak about Hayden White’s impact on Western historiography, having the wrong perception that the literature is “the nightmare from which history is continually trying to wake”³³. But literature is not the nightmare of history, and, paradoxically, it is its close friend. From Herodotus to Foucault, the literary form is the most used way of expressing the historical past. David Harlan remarked that “literature has return to history, unfurling her circus silks of metaphor and allegory, misprision and aporia, trace and sign, demanding that historians accepts her mocking presence right at the heart of what they had once insisted was their own autonomous and truly scientific discipline”³⁴.

The presence of literature in historical knowledge does not jeopardize the epistemological status of history. Historians use this entire arsenal of literature (comparisons, analogies, metaphors, traces, allegories signs, meanings etc.) to resurrect the people’s acts, actions and facts, but not in the manner of Michelet. For historians, languages and literatures are means not purposes. Like many other philosophers, theorists and historians, I also think that it is an authentic correspondence between *history-lived* and *history-written*.

History has *a specific epistemology* in spite of the fact that history is not epistemology as Keith Jenkins said³⁵, but it can have at least one epistemology. This epistemology of history is not analytical or empirical, but rather it is for the understanding of life and epochs. The key-words of this epistemology are acts, actions, facts, events, processes and phenomena. We can have one or more theories of history.

Starting from Derrida’s illusion, that we have full access to knowledge only through language³⁶, ‘Linguistic Turn’ has emphasized the *language*, the *discourse* and the *narration*. What about personal experience and actions? The only reason of a discourse or a text is linked by the idea of expressing something concrete. The full access to knowledge derives from personal experience, while language is, rather, a limit, a boundary in expressing this experience.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 245, note 1

³³ Linda Orr, *The Revenge of Literature: A History of History*, *New Literary History*, 18:1, Autumn 1986, p. 2

³⁴ D. Harlan, *Intellectual History and the Return of Literature*, *AHR Forum*, 2001, p. 581

³⁵ K. Jenkins, *Refiguring...*, *op. cit.*, p. 46

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 19

'Linguistic Turn' has a great impact on historical knowledge in the last quarter of 20th century. For example, the outstanding historians such as M. de Certeau, H. White, R. Koselleck, F. Ankersmit, K. Jenkins are obviously influenced by this cultural phenomenon.

Due to the contributions of Ankersmit, concepts such as 'metaphor', 'representation' 'narrative' can be better understood in the practice of writing histories.