

THE AIM OF INTERPRETATION IS TO CREATE
PERPLEXITY IN THE FACE OF THE REAL:
HAYDEN WHITE IN CONVERSATION WITH ERLEND ROGNE¹

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ER: I'd like to suggest that we begin with what must be a very traditional opening: with a couple of questions about your academic development. We meet in Rome, and this is also where you published your first essays in the 1950s. It would be interesting to hear where this interest in Continental philosophy came from, especially since Italian and German thinking wasn't held in very high esteem in American historiography at that time.

HW: Well, I came to Rome on a Fulbright Scholarship to write my doctoral dissertation in medieval ecclesiastical history, on Gregorian church reforms in the eleventh century and the early twelfth century. The reason I was working on medieval history, and the church especially, was that the Roman Catholic Church was something I knew absolutely nothing about when I went to college. I found it amazing that an institution based upon a miracle, which by definition cannot be comprehended except through faith, could sustain itself and dominate even the monarchs and the political powers for over a thousand years. So I was interested in that, which made me interested in intellectual history, in the history of ideas. And then I was interested in how belief is possible, and especially belief that begins with the acceptance of a miracle. I regard myself as eminently rational, and therefore irrationality interests me. It seems pathological, although I know that's not the case. Most of our creativity as human beings, I learned from Giambattista Vico, is a result of creative error and the combination of emotions or passions with rationality or reason. But when I was a younger man, I was more certain about things than I am now.

So I came to Rome. It was in 1953, and I came over for two years. When I was here, I met Mario Praz, who was publishing a journal called *English Miscellany*. I'd always been interested in R. G. Collingwood, Arnold Toynbee, and the philosophy of history, even as I was working as a medievalist, and Praz said that he would welcome something on these topics. So I published on Collingwood, Toynbee, and Christopher Dawson, a then very well-known Roman Catholic philosopher of history. In general, European culture interested me more than American culture, because American culture was too puritanical.

ER: In a moral sense or in a scientific sense?

HW: In every sense. American culture is superficial because in it there is a belief in destiny and predestination in a Calvinistic way. That is one of the founding

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presuppositions of American society. It is inherently anti-traditionalist, very rationalist, in a way that Roman Catholicism is not. The idea that you can completely sever all connection with the roots of the Christian tradition itself, that you can return, as the Protestants thought they could do, to an earlier form of Christianity and completely abandon 1,500 years of tradition, seemed to me the basis of a peculiar kind of revolutionary thought that you'd certainly find in Europe, but that was especially intense in America. And yet at the same time, American society took pride in itself in breaking with its immediate past. It's a very conservative and even reactionary society. So there's a paradox there.

This is probably what, as I can see now but didn't see then, underlay my interest in the philosophy of history. Philosophy of history has to do with the relationship between past and present. It seems to me that history as a discipline presupposes the idea that there is a divide or a gap between the present and the past that requires a special discipline to bridge it. That's a philosophical problem. In ancient times, there was no sense of a distinction between a past and the present; they were continuous. In ancient Hebrew thought, the past is immediately present in every instance, in the form of the Covenant. Abraham, Moses, and Elijah are all always present for the Jews, so there's no technical problem in knowing the relationship between the past and the present. (There is a moral problem, because one is always falling away from the Covenant, but that is something different.) This is one of the reasons that the ancient Hebrews really didn't develop a history. History presupposes some kind of divide, or gap, between past and present that requires a special mode of consciousness to bridge, and the science of history is supposed to do that. Every culture has an interest in the past, but the scientific historical study of the past is quite different from other cultures' conceptions of the relationship between the past and the present. Scientific historical study of the past is only one of many possible ways of studying the past.

ER: In the closing paragraphs of your early essay on Christopher Dawson, there's a reference to Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel. Was that also an influence, coming to Italy, discovering existentialism and the other Continental traditions?

HW: Yeah. Jean-Paul Sartre was one of my intellectual heroes, and the whole existentialist tradition, more in its French than in its German, Heideggerian variety, although I've come to be more interested in Heidegger lately. There is a German version of existentialism that comes in with Karl Löwith, but it's phenomenological rather more than Sartre's. Existentialism, along with Marxism, seemed to me in my youth like the only possible way of looking at the human condition. Marxism explains the material side, existentialism the psychological. In other words, I think that the existentialist notion of *the situation* that calls for choice and commitment or renunciation, is the peculiarly human one. I think that accounts for Sartre's massive influence on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who is another important thinker in my career.

So yes, Sartre was very important to me. But I knew Jaspers and Marcel and Continental philosophy from the teachings of my beloved professor, William J. Bossombrook. When I first went to college, I fell under his tutelage. Arthur Danto and I were in the same class at Wayne State University, studying with him.

ER: If we move back to America, then, Peter Novick famously described American historiography as a century of defense and critique of “that noble dream” of objectivity. Is that a recognizable scenario for you, looking back at the start of your career? Do you see yourself as fitting into that plot, so to speak?

HW: Well, as a historian, writing intellectual institutional history of the church, I was influenced most by Max Weber and Weberian conceptions of leadership and institutions and so forth. So I had committed myself to the idea that history was not so much a matter of being objective as it was a discipline in the German sense of *Wissenschaft*. Also, being an existentialist, I couldn’t believe in the idea of objectivity in the study of things human. I think one can be objective and have a very systematic idea of what that means in the study of physical nature, the study of atoms and chemical processes and so forth. But Max Weber talked about objectivity of the kind that comes when you take on a profession or a discipline.

So I’m not so much concerned with the “objectivity question,” which I think again I trace back to this Calvinist and Protestant confusion of objectivity with being right. You see, people who want objectivity want to be right at any cost, and I believe this is attached to questions of personal salvation of a Protestant kind. In the same way that the divine election of the individual is supposed to be manifested, according to Weber, in success in worldly life, so too, for a scholar to be right is a sign of his or her salvation. But I don’t think that being correct, or right, is what it’s all about. I have never felt that the important thing is to find out the truth about the past. Rather, it is to find out what is real rather than what is true. So I’m always suspicious of people who are interested in the truth at any cost. There is a time for the truth, and there is a time for illusion—that’s Nietzsche.

ER: You’ve already mentioned the existentialist dimension in your work. Now, structuralism and post-structuralism are often seen as having emphasized the system, or language, or discourse, at the cost of reducing the importance of the subject, or free will, or even history. But I’ve always read you as seeking a kind of middle ground where you retain the importance of human freedom. Even when you are writing about language theory, writing about the text, you seem to be negotiating between freedom and unfreedom.

HW: Or between the structure and the event. Yeah, that’s fair enough. It seems to me that you can’t live a human life without structure, but you can’t live a personal life without the event, without the situation of choice. What society does is that it sets limits on our choices, on our capacity to choose. These limits can be open—I hope they’re as open as possible—or they can be closed. So there’s a sense in which possibilities of choice may be determined by the situation, but choice is still necessary within it, including the choice of rejecting the structure of the situation, the revolutionary choice. And for me this has no grounding in transcendental concepts; I think it has to do with the human condition. If we’re in a situation, we have to make choices all the time.

This goes back to Aristotle. What struck me in the reading of his *Ethics* when I was still a young person was the idea that it’s impossible for us to perform adequately all the roles that we’re given in a society without offending other roles. Any choice we make in our capacity, let’s say, as teachers, is going to be detrimental to some other role that we are trying to play. That’s why the classic nineteenth-

century novel always deals with the conflicts between love and work, profession and passion. One is put into those situations of choice just by the nature of society. Society says we must perform all of our roles adequately, but the roles we are given are contradictory one with the other. And so one lives in contradiction, I think. Thus the attempt to live a consistent life is inauthentic.

This is why in ethics I'm a situationist. I believe that one's sense of obligation, responsibility, and so forth, depends upon the situation that you're in. My situation is not the same as yours, even though at this moment we are occupying something like the same situation. But you bring with you commitments of a kind that are pertinent to the way you would relate to this situation, and they are different from mine. So there's difference, there's negotiation, and what you hope for is that every individual will be given the widest possible range of choices—up to a point where you have to ask yourself whether you want to stay within the system or oppose it. That's the political, that's when you go into politics. Situationist ethics gives up all that chat about authenticity, about being the same person in every situation, and talks much more about playing a role adequately.

ER: In the 1960s and 1970s it appeared to many to be a problem to entertain this kind of vision of society and humankind and also to hold a structuralist or post-structuralist view of language. Have you seen yourself as negotiating between these positions even when you deal with theoretical issues concerning language—as stepping back from its closed systems?

HW: No, I don't think so. It's interesting that you put it that way. What structuralism taught me was that the situation is always structured. And like language, from the beginning it's arbitrarily structured, or it is structured to the advantage of certain groups in the totality. The rules themselves are arbitrarily put in place. They also make communication possible. But one of the rules of language use and of social being is that humans not only can live by rules, but they can change rules, and can make a distinction between rule-governed activity and rule-changing activity. One comes to situations in which the press of the situation is to force you to come to one and only one conclusion about what you should do. But in reality you come trailing with all of these other obligations, so that you have to constantly think dialectically.

I think structuralism ultimately is critical of highly structured societies. It tries to explain how social systems are possible, and how they function, but always behind it was the question of how social systems change. And that's what post-structuralism dealt with: how does noise in the system build to the point where it explodes the system itself? That's what Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Lacan are all about. Post-structuralism is a necessary supplement, or complement, to structuralism. And it played itself out over a period of about thirty years, like all systems do.

In came structuralism, in the period just before and during the Second World War, at a point in which capitalist society had reached a period of hyper-structuralization for purposes of war. A society shuts down any kind of individualism in times of war. It becomes a state of the exception, as Giorgio Agamben calls it. They say: "OK, once you had all of these freedoms and rights, but we can't afford that now. The terrorists are about to attack us." Just like President George W. Bush

is seeking to restrict the rights of Americans on the grounds that the terrorist threat requires that we can't afford them, they're luxuries. (Let me say that I don't think they're luxuries.)

So structuralism, with Claude Lévi-Strauss and people of that ilk, and also like sociologists of Weber's type before the War, really provides the solution to the question of how people like Adolf Eichmann, who thought they were just ordinary guys doing their job, could do what they did. How was it possible? They were so completely assimilated to the system that they'd lost all sense of there being an option to their performing these kinds of deeds. I think structuralism is really about the nature of advanced capitalist society, a society that becomes more and more structured and more and more determinative of the nature of the choices of the individual, while at the same time providing them with the sense that their choices are free! They say that it's an open market, when in reality the advertising propaganda so condition the individual that there's no choice involved! Structuralism explains how this terrible machine of advanced capitalist society, which is responsible for the destruction of the whole ecosphere, is possible. And post-structuralism explains how it is possible to oppose this machine. That's the way I would put it. And by the way, I think that the French versions of structuralism and post-structuralism owe everything to Sartre and his attempt to combine existentialism and Marxist conceptions of history and society.

Another person who really has had a profound influence on me is Roland Barthes. I think that Barthes was the most inventive writer and critic of the post-World War Two generation in France. It was under his inspiration that I turned not so much to linguistics as to discourse theory, and began to see history as discourse rather than as discipline. I would say that that was very liberating for me, as I know it has been liberating for others. Discourse has to do with the production of meaning through combination and through what Georg Lukács called composition. Research is a necessary part of the rules of the game of professional historiography—it sets restraints on what you can do—but still, the payoff is nothing if it doesn't get distilled into a discourse. And the discourse can either be a narrative or it can be a structural work. But once you begin to see the human sciences, and the social sciences in general, as discourse, you see that these have their functions in the self-production of the human in response to different situations across time and space.

ER: Barthes and other post-structuralists were at times very critical of narrative and of the possibilities of discourse. But it is tempting to read you as trying also to define the rules for a *genuine* discourse.

HW: Yeah, I understand what you're saying. I was very much struck, many years ago, by Berthold Brecht's idea that narrative coherence and storytelling is Aristotelian; that it presupposes the kind of subject and the kind of substance that Aristotle presupposed in his discussion of individuals. Fernand Braudel attacks narrative because, he says, it's not a carrier of ideology; it *is* ideology. And I was interested in Barthes's notion that history and myth have a lot in common, because they both use narrative. So I was suspicious of narrative, and this is what led me to study literary theory and to look to literary works for models. I think that the post-structuralists, in attacking structuralism, attacked narrative also, as a structured form of discourse that works toward closure rather than openness and the open work.

But the more I read Paul Ricoeur and others, the more I realized that there is more to be said for narrative, and that narrative comes in many varieties. Modernist narrative, as in Gertrude Stein, is still narrative, but it promotes an open work. It doesn't require the author to close everything off and put his or her stamp on it, you see, and turn the reader into a passive recipient. When you read Virginia Woolf or Proust and writers of their ilk, the fragmentary nature of the passages allows the reader to participate. And this becomes a kind of instruction in how to make meaning.

So that's why I came back to narrative, and with it the idea that the logic of narrative is not the logic of the syllogism. It's tropological, and one can study tropes and follow even the most disjointed narrative adequately by replicating in one's own mind the kind of turns that are never logical. In a modernist narrative, beginnings and endings are disjointed from one another, whereas in the nineteenth-century realist novel, beginnings and endings are entailed by each other. So, yeah, I've come back to the idea that narrative is a mode of discourse that is called for in certain situations but not in others. If you want to stress continuity in change, you can do it through narrative, or if you want to stress change in continuity, you can do it through narrative. But then you have different modalities.

ER: At times you've distinguished between the act of narrativizing and the act of narrating . . .

HW: Yeah, that's right. That's quite true, I do. When you impose a narrativized vision of the world on the world, I call it narrativization. Modernism abandons the domestic narrative of nineteenth-century realism, but that doesn't mean that it abandons narration. Narration is the act of speaking. Any time you speak in the first person about a thing in the world as a third-person mode of existence, you're narrating. Now there is a sense in which that's true: any time you speak in the first person about a thing in the world as a third-person mode of existence, you're narrating. But narrativizing is something else. Deconstruction, or, I should say, post-structuralism, de-narrativizes myth, history, and so forth, and in this sense, it's the complement of narrativization.

ER: At this point, I'd like to bring two more specific aspects of your work into the discussion, namely, your preference for modernism as a model for historiography, on the one hand, and the theme of the sublime on the other—the sublime historical consciousness you treated in 1982 in "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation." Those are two themes that are intertwined, but also developed a bit separately in your essays.

HW: Well, I'm glad you put a date in there, because I always have to remind people that I've been writing for about fifty years, and what I said fifty years ago may not be consistent with what I think now, but that's because I've changed my mind.

First, I admire modernist writing because it is experimental. It brings the doctrine of style into question, the aestheticist notion of style that suggests that there is a proper style, an elegant style that is proper to the person of taste. It brings the whole aesthetics of taste into question.

Second, modernism is born of a realization that we no longer live in a world possessing an essence or a substance. In other words, modernism is born of the sense

of the death of substance in the Aristotelian sense—the idea that behind appearances, there is some organizing principle that endows appearances with meaning and identity. In the same way, the Christian conception of the soul is that it is the soul that defines the individual and combines body and spirit in a particular way, a given identity. The whole modern doctrine of individualism, the whole question of identity, is threatened by the end of substance. By this I mean exactly what Heidegger meant: the end of metaphysics, or of religion. Religion teaches that we're all endowed with this precious substance, which is released in death, or survives death, if you're a Christian. Ontology suggests, as with Spinoza, that there is a world substance out of which individuals are made. We all share in this substance in one way or another, but it's individuated. In abandoning Aristotelianism and the Aristotelian worldview, from Galileo to Newton through Lavoisier and Darwin, modern, materialistic sciences abandoned the doctrine of substance, which is to metaphysics what the doctrine of the soul or the spirit is to Christianity.

Modernism I think is born of that. Literary modernism—not Habermas's modernism, which is a different thing—is torn, is in agony because of the loss of the sense that there is something tying things and people together into a one. That's gone. And you get Freud's notion that the psyche is not a unified persona, not even in the most heroic individual, but is conflicted, is the ground on which desire meets frustration, repression, secondary elaborations of all kinds, and so forth. Freud destroys, to my satisfaction, the nineteenth-century doctrine of character, the idea that you're born with a certain character that is given to you by your parents and ancestors. It is true that you've got a genetic endowment now, but it's not a substance, you see, it is variable, and so forth.

So modernism in literary writing inherently questions and undermines the idealist conception of art, of the art object as something transcendental, as being at least something that's spiritual, in a world that is not otherwise of spirit. I don't believe that. I think art is another human activity. Thank God we have it, but it's not anything to worship. So there's that thing about modernism that appeals to me. You see how that is consistent with an existentialist way of thinking, and I think that existentialism is *the* modernist philosophy. Phenomenology and existentialism. Phenomenology says: we don't look for the *noumena* any longer; we have intuitions of a world of appearances. Nietzsche says: there is nothing behind appearances; things are just what they appear to be. And that is what underlies modernist experimentation. Think of Marcel Duchamp who put ready-made objects in the museum and called them art. Here there's no substantive art. There are different artifacts, and some are valued more highly than others. There is no inherent beauty, there is no inherent goodness, no inherent truth—those all go by the board.

What you get, then, in modernist writing, is a discovery of the depths behind things, not as meaning, but as chaos, as sublime, as that in confrontation with which you're thrown back upon the incapacities of the mind to grasp the conditions of your existence. That's why writing in modernism increasingly becomes the failure of the writer, the failure of the writer to do what the writer had traditionally been charged to do. You get a work like Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, a five-volume book that's about how he came to write this book.

This kind of turning back upon the self accounts for the third thing that interests me about modernism, namely, irony as the basis for the living of a life that's going

to be contradictory no matter what you do, unless you decide to do nothing, in which case that's hardly living, right? It's this modernism that I see as a response to Habermas's Enlightenment modernism, which led to the hyper-structuralization of the world of late capitalism.

ER: Habermas is describing the modern world under the aspect of its modernity, whereas cultural modernism and postmodernism would be reactions to that very modernity.

HW: Yes, but responses, not reactions. Reactions suggest a mechanistic effect, whereas in art you get responses, not just reactions. People in modern times often *react* to this by doing what the advertisers tell them they should do, or what the state tells them they should do, or what the government or what their firm tells them they should do. The artist *responds* by trying to endow this situation with meaning. The way you do this is by symbolization, and that's what modernist art does. It is symbols without substance. The Romantics still believed that the symbol was in some sense grounded in something higher, more beautiful, and so forth. Modernism has many romantic motifs, but without the belief in beauty as a substance. In fact, modernist writing like Virginia Woolf's and so forth finds out that there's a great deal of ugliness in life, even in the most beautiful form, rather like Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The sublime is what underlies modernist aesthetics. Think of the poetry of Ezra Pound, the celebration of the fragment as a poetic form, the abandonment of rhyme and of many other formal features in poetry. And think of the collapse of the distinction between poetry and prose that you have in the great modernist writers. Now all of this makes modernist aesthetics more similar to the aesthetics of the sublime than to the aesthetics of the beautiful.

ER: In the old eighteenth-century sense?

HW: Yes. But the *doctrine* of the sublime in Edmund Burke and in Immanuel Kant is intended to domesticate the sublime by arguing that it appears as morally uplifting. In the presence of the grandeur of nature, you become aware of how puny you are as an individual. It makes you feel humble and so forth, makes you have pious thoughts. But I think that the modernists' sublime tends more toward the demonic and toward the diabolical in the literal sense of diabolism. The words "devil" and "diabolical" come from the Greek word *diabolein*, which means to throw something across your path. So the diabolical sublime I see as that which blocks without any relief. Kant sees it as what springs back on you and forces you to recognize that there is something greater, grander than yourself, something incomprehensible at the end. I think that you get with the modernist sublime the idea that there is something larger than yourself, but it's not grander, it's not transcendental. It's the abyss.

So the modernist artist becomes someone who attacks false idealism, the formalist idealism, and becomes interested in form itself. The form that is its own content. It turns out that human beings have a plastic power, a power of endowing with form. And thereby, meaning for a modernist aesthetics is form itself. Whenever you find form or pattern, you can be sure that there is a human presence. Human beings create things that they set alongside nature and that are infinitely more beautiful, infinitely more attractive to the intelligence, than raw nature. For

me, that's what the history of ideas is about, this process in different cultures and different societies of giving form to what would otherwise be either raw nature or formlessness. Nature doesn't need the discovery of the law of gravity, or of the law of attraction of bodies, human beings did.

ER: The essence of history is lost as well in modernism. I mean, it's no longer possible to believe in a transcendent meaning in, or direction for, history.

HW: That's right, and that's why it falls to people who study history, rather than just the past, to endow it with meaning. And they do it by symbolization. Which means, it depends upon the array or the repertory of symbols they have available to them to produce their own version of it. Now, what I think is wrong with professional historical writing is it doesn't take up that challenge any longer. The great historians, Machiavelli, Vico, Burckhardt—Ranke!—they did. They wrote history as a way of, I think, imposing a meaning on history; they think they found it. Not Burckhardt, but Ranke thought that he found it. But you know, that's a necessary illusion of a certain kind of artist. So, my view is that modern professional historiography refuses the task that is given to the historian once religion is dead, once metaphysics is impossible, when all you have left is history. When you want to ask the question that Kant said is the fourth question, "what is man?," "was ist der Mensch?," all you've got is history! The great historians are the ones who tried to endow time with some kind of form or coherency. Lived time as well as abstract time. That's why I've always been interested in the work of Paul Ricoeur, even though I don't agree with a great deal of what he wrote. I mean, he still yearned for religious meaning. He was a very religious man, you know.

ER: I thought you wrote a very moving piece in *History and Theory* when he passed away . . .

HW: Oh, he was a very generous intellectual. He read everything. I don't know how he found the time to write. And he read everything very carefully. He's one of the great synthesizers. I have a great deal of respect for him, and I think that our differences have to do with the differences in our cultures, our *Bildung*. But I liked him a lot too, as an individual, because he was a witty man. Ricoeur had a great ironic wit, and he had the serenity of someone who has faith. He could allow all kinds of points of view, because he knew that there were grounds for faith. So he could entertain the wildest ideas without becoming upset. You see, he wasn't like these fanatics who want to stamp out error. He was interested in the intensities of one's convictions, whether they differed from his or not.

ER: In an existentialist reading, when confronted with the abyss, it would be up to you to take responsibility and act in a specifically human way. And at times, you've portrayed the sublime historical consciousness as an insight that is conducive to ethical behavior, to an existential world of responsibility.

HW: Well, insofar as you're confronted with the sublime and experience the Nietzschean thought of looking behind appearances and finding nothing, you can either draw back and despair, or you can, as the existentialist would say, try to make something out of it yourself. The notion that humanity is a self-made thing, makes itself, is behind all of this. It can only make itself by making its own world, and it sets its world over against that of nature as both a protection and a barrier. There are risks involved here, as we can see now. Humanity has marked itself off

from nature at the price of destroying our world. And that's a tragic or an ironic thing, depending on how you look at it.

By the way, I no longer do research the way I did for my doctoral dissertation and for my book on *Metahistory*. I largely write on topics that other people set for me. I write in response to situations. And so the essay form becomes pertinent. When I wrote that piece on "The Politics of Historical Interpretation," *Critical Inquiry* had a special issue on the politics of interpretation, and they asked what this would look like from the standpoint of history. History is an interpretive enterprise, what are its politics? Now what is striking in looking at the foundation of history as a discipline is that until the nineteenth century, history was an amateur activity. Anybody could practice it. It wasn't even taught in the university; universities taught antiquities but they did not teach history. It's only in the nineteenth century that they turned history into a discipline and put it in the curriculum, in the 1830s and 1840s. And its function, primarily, was to serve the state and to provide a genealogy for the nation-state, because throughout Europe when the nations were being formed, there was resistance to the idea of the centralization that it was incumbent upon the sovereigns to impose upon these various national entities in order to transform, let's say, Burgundians into Frenchmen.

So the professional historians were employed by the state in the universities, and the universities were all run by the state, they served the state. Insofar as there was political diversity in the electorate, they served one or another of the parties—all under the guise of being objective, or, if not objective, at least neutral. And all in the guise of being able to show how ideology had distorted the history of the nation to the advantage of one or another of the political parties. So in "The Politics of Historical Interpretation" I asked what ontological foundations allowed these historians to think, in good faith, that they were just telling the story as it actually happened, while at the same time serving the state as a way of castrating or neutralizing *overt* ideologies like Marxism, or communism, or socialism, or anarchism for that matter, and acting as if there were no ideological component to their own work!

This is what brought me to the debate over the sublime. It seemed to me that history, in becoming a discipline, wanted to show that the development of the nation was a beautiful thing, something to be proud of. It would erase all of the violence, making sure that anyone who was destroyed in genocide or a pogrom or a crusade deserved it. History would show that things are exactly the way they are supposed to be. It seemed to me that this history was put in place to destroy the kind of vision of the past that someone like Walter Benjamin had, as nothing but a tale of barbarism posing as civilization but being as much destructive as it is creative.

ER: You never elaborated on the sublime after "The Politics of Historical Interpretation" . . .

HW: Well, François Lyotard picked it up for the end of *Le différend* and so did Frank Ankersmit. But it's not my idea, after all. I really put it in a political context at that moment, a moment at which, as you know, the West was congratulating itself on its victory over communism. That whole debate about the failure of the European left interested me a lot. We never had a left in the United States; we had

a center and a right. But I've always been on the left in my politics, and I think that we need to open up things rather than support the *doxa*.

ER: Both Ankersmit and Lyotard have used the term in ways different from you. Ankersmit writes about what he calls sublime historical experience, and it has been a tendency over the last decade to work with concepts like "experience" and "presence" in order to describe history and historical understanding. Do you think that's a fruitful approach?

HW: Well, I'm very much interested in this. First of all, I can understand that what we've experienced is a loss of presence rather than a loss of meaning. That was Eelco Runia's idea in his essay "Presence" in *History and Theory*. But the idea that you could have an experience of a past phenomenon—an experience of the presence of the past—can only be an illusion. It's a contradiction in terms. Because by definition the past is over, is what is no longer present, right?

But you could get the illusion of presence, and this is what Ankersmit, I think, has in mind. Ankersmit no longer speaks about having an experience *of* history; he has an experience *about* history, of *historicality*. The example he gives is when he visited the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, the Yad Vashem. He says that what impressed him most was the memorial to the children who were killed, not the display of the history of the Holocaust inside. The museum display was an attempt to give an experience *of* history, and it left him kind of cold. The memorial to the dead children, he says, was an experience *about* history. You see the force of the argument.

ER: Claudio Fogu has taken a somewhat different approach from that of Ankersmit. He has argued that there was a distinction in Italian fascism between the *historical* and the *historic*. In the latter, history was not so much understood as a time span that could be studied, but rather as the event of being a historic subject.

HW: The staging of one's own historicality, as in the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*. Yeah, I think that's true, I think it's a very good distinction. He, as I recall, says that it's worked out in Giovanni Gentile, and I think it's true that there's a great deal to Italian fascism in the self-conscious staging of events *as if they were history*, when in reality they were quite inconsequential on the world stage. I mean, a historical event would be one that changes history, right? So what you do is you live for a day, put on your fascist uniform, and go and march in the parade and listen to *Il Duce*, and for a moment you live historically. But who can live historically? No one—even Napoleon nodded from time to time. But this would correspond, you know, to Runia's conception of presence. I think that it probably fulfills a need, but for me, it seems just like baroque aesthetics. You know, stagy.

Having said that, I think it's important that historians investigate the theme of presence and the way it might change the way we're thinking about history. I think it's important they do so for the reasons I gave at the beginning: In our time, if you're an enlightened intellectual, you can't fall back on religion, and you can't fall back on ontology. All you've got left is art. And modernist and postmodernist art means experimentation, the surreal. Surrealism is the art of presence, and what it does is invoke presence, precisely by the violation of the normal expectations.

ER: In an essay from 1996, you wrote of what you called “The Modernist Event”, and I wonder whether the attack on the World Trade Center might be an example of what you had in mind. There is an American website called “Complete 911 Timeline” where they try to gather all the facts of the matter and put them in a timeline. And this timeline currently runs back to 1973, with more than 5,000 “events.” So you’ve got all this material, but still the event itself seems elusive. I mean, you don’t really get to the truth or the meaning of what happened.

HW: No, you don’t get to the truth. As Lévi-Strauss said in a famous essay, the more information you get, the less comprehension you can have of a situation. The greater the comprehension, the less data are covered. But supposing you think of 9/11 not as something that we want the truth about, but we want to know about its reality. *Then* the more events you have, the better, because this reality is highly complex. You can’t tell a simple story about it. You want loose ends. You want to create an archive, as it were, that will admit of a wide variety of interpretations, all equally plausible. Because the aim of interpretation is to create perplexity in the face of the real—not to clear it up. People who want the truth want to be able to wrap up the event and put it away in the archives.

Moses Maimonides, the great Jewish sage of the thirteenth century, said that the point of interpreting the Bible was to increase the number of possible interpretations, not decrease them. The Bible related God’s actions, and they were incomprehensible to humans. Humans have to make sense of them, but in order to do that they must show how reality is really very complicated! The desire for the simple, you see, is what governs most historical research. They say: “Let’s get the true story.” But there is no one true story!

Wolfgang Ernst recently wrote an essay where he adopted an attitude toward the past rather more like that of the archeologist than that of the historian, in this sense: he wants to gather in all the fragments of truth to create an archive that doesn’t get reduced to a single story. The archive itself can be written, you see, like they’re doing with this timeline. Of course, the people who are doing the timeline are hoping that it’ll all somehow crystallize when you get enough facts. But reality isn’t like that; reality has nothing behind it! So that’s why we nihilists, as Nietzsche would say, welcome the information revolution. The modernist event is precisely that event that belies the conventional conception of history as containing only those events that can be explained.

I’m now writing a piece called “The Historical Event.”² It starts off with 9/11 and the Holocaust as modernist events and goes on from there. Now it’s a very simple-minded idea, isn’t it, that at certain times in history there are events that no one could have anticipated. If you’re going to write the history of these events, how they originated, and what their consequences were, you can’t use the same principles of explanation that you use to explain other kinds of events. In other words, a genuinely novel event would be one for which you could not use the principles of explanation that you have become comfortable with in dealing with those events that you felt that you could provide an explanation for.

2. “The Historical Event,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 19, no. 2 (2008), 9-34.

ER: And then those of a slightly more essentialist inclination would say that then you presuppose that not only does reality “change” as in history moving on-ward, providing us with new experiences, but the perception of what reality itself consists has changed. And *that* they would find hard to accept.

HW: Yeah. A philosopher I met some years ago asked whether it was possible that, in an evolving universe, change changes—that the laws that govern change in our world would themselves change. So that change would be something that appeared monstrous, unthinkable. When the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen called 9/11 a great work of art, people were really hard on him. But if you want to know what a sublime work of art would be, that would be one example—the pictures of 9/11, not the event.

ER: What do you think historians would have to do in order to be able to cope with events of this order?

HW: Well, I’m not really concerned about the discipline. I’m much more interested in the way creative writers, literary writers, are dealing with history. One of the things about postmodernist writing that interests me is that so much of it is about history. I mean, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, and Philip Roth—everybody is writing historical novels now. The historical novel has made a comeback. But it’s a new kind of historical novel, because all of these writers are dealing with modernist events and use modernist techniques to represent them. Think of Kurt Vonnegut and his treatment of the Dresden bombing. Think of DeLillo’s *Underworld*, which is a critique of capitalism insofar as it manufactures waste. It’s about waste and waste disposal, and the impossibility of disposing of the waste of advanced capitalism. Where do you put toxic waste, waste that will be toxic for thousands of years to come, without destroying the earth? Think of W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, which is a phenomenal book. You see, you need imagination to close the gap between the present and the past. And I think one of the things you have to do, then, is to show how elusive, how difficult it is. That’s the whole point about *Austerlitz*. I mean, at the end, he’s continuing his search!

ER: In your opinion, is this also a particularly responsible way of dealing with history?

HW: I think it’s more responsible than this false clarity. I think it’s more responsible because it puts more of the burden on the reader. Eric Hobsbawm and I were once asked what it would take for history to give us some insight into the future. I said: “More imagination!” and Hobsbawm said: “No, more rationality.” Too much imagination was what had led to Nazism. He is a man of the Enlightenment.

ER: You take sides with imagination in historical thinking.

HW: Well, I think that prior to its becoming a professional discipline, that’s all we had.

ER: And with these postmodern or modernist authors we were talking about, we’re coming back to that way of dealing with history.

HW: Yeah, and Sebald is a good example of it.

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