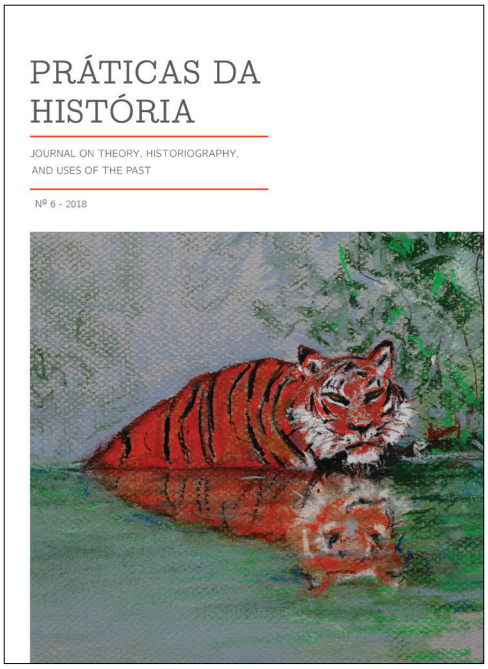

Número especial **A História de Hayden White**
Special issue **The History of Hayden White**

The Deep Content of the Form: Hayden White on "Freud's Tropology of Dreaming"

Nancy Partner

Práticas da História, n.º 6 (2018): 77-88

www.praticasdahistoria.pt

Práticas da História, n.º 6 (2018): 77-88

Nancy Partner

The Deep Content of the Form: Hayden White on "Freud's Tropology of Dreaming"

Hayden White's only article entirely on Sigmund Freud's work is on *The Interpretation of Dreams*, specifically on the dreamwork "operations" by which the mind transforms libidinal impulses into the scenes, sounds, and events the dreamer experiences as the dream. White recognizes in Freud's interpretive insights a clear analogy with the formal centerpiece of his own work: the major tropes which describe the shape of thought itself. White's appreciation of how Freud's revolutionary work on the significance of dreams uncovered the formal linguistic devices exhibited at every level of representation is shared by other major thinkers, two of whom I discuss here: the philosopher Paul Ricoeur and the psychoanalyst Marshall Edelson. They share the comprehension of how psychoanalysis illuminates the deep structure of all cultural artifacts of language as originating from sources deeper than those available to consciousness, and issuing in the formal structures of metaphor, metonymy, synechdoche, and irony.
Keywords: Hayden White; Paul Ricoeur; Marshall Edelson; dreamwork.

O Conteúdo Profundo da Forma: Hayden White acerca da "Tropologia dos Sonhos de Freud"

O único artigo de Hayden White dedicado inteiramente ao trabalho de Sigmund Freud foca-se na obra A *Interpretação dos Sonhos* e, especificamente, nas "operações" de trabalho onírico através das quais a mente transforma os impulsos libidinosos em cenas, sons e eventos que o sonhador experiencia enquanto sonho. White identifica nas perspetivas interpretativas de Freud uma analogia com a base formal do seu próprio trabalho: os principais tropos que descrevem a forma do próprio pensamento. A apreciação de White sobre como o trabalho revolucionário de Freud em torno do significado dos sonhos revelou os aparatos linguísticos formais compreendidos em todos os níveis da representação é partilhada por outros pensadores, dois dos quais serão discutidos neste artigo: o filósofo Paul Ricoeur e o psicanalista Marshall Edelson. Ambos partilham uma compreensão de como a psicanálise ilumina a forma como a estrutura profunda de todos os artefactos culturais da linguagem tem origem em fontes mais profundas do que as que podem ser acedidas através da consciência, representadas pelas estruturas formais da metáfora, metonímia, sinédoque e ironia.
Palavras-chave: Hayden White; Paul Ricoeur; Marshall Edelson; trabalho onírico.

The Deep Content of the Form: Hayden White on "Freud's Tropology of Dreaming"

Nancy Partner*

And it was the form of the dream that mattered most to him. This is why he considered the dream-work as the linchpin of his system... 'At bottom,' he said, 'dreams are nothing other than a particular form of thinking, made possible by the conditions of the state of sleep. It is the dream-work which creates that form, and it alone is the essence of dreaming – the explanation of its peculiar nature.' In other words, the form of the dream is itself a content...

"Freud's Tropology of Dreaming": Hayden White on The Rhetoric of the Dream-Work

This article, published in 1999 in the collection *Figural Realism*, seems to be the only one Hayden White wrote specifically on Sigmund Freud.[1] White's consideration of Freud's defining work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, focuses immediately on the "operations" by which libidinal impulses motivating the dream are transformed into the "symbols, scenes, and events that seem to occur in the dream" – the experience the dreamer can recall[2] The mind's "operations" in the dream-work are the subject of the essay because White recognizes

* McGill University (nancy.partner@mcgill.ca).

1 Hayden White, "Freud's Tropology of Dreaming," in *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 101-25.

2 White, "Freud's Tropology," 101.

in Freud's interpretive insights a clear analogy with the formal centerpiece of his own work: the major tropes which describe the shape of thought itself. The core insight of this article is that the dream-work recapitulates (or perhaps is the source of) the tropology of thought, especially in written form.

The four key "operations" of the dreamwork – condensation, displacement, representation, and secondary revision – are the means universal to all dreamers for transforming impulses of the id into "figurative signifiers" both visual and auditory, the way the mind thinks while dreaming.[3] White is particularly struck by Freud's insistence on precisely four distinct operations which function just as the four major tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony do in poetics "to mediate between the literal and figurative levels of meaning..."[4] Knowledge of the rhetorical tropes was part nineteenth-century general culture, well known to Freud as it was to every educated person and revealed by his frequent description of the dream-work as analogous to poetic discourse. In the course of his essay, White works out more fully and precisely than others have done the analogy between the theory of tropes and Freud's analyses of the processes of dreaming, proving that "what Freud has done [in the dream-work] is to rediscover, or reinvent, the theory of tropes conventionally used by rhetoricians in his culture to characterize figurative language in general and to explicate the relation between literal and figurative meanings in poetic discourse specifically."[5] White concludes: It was "the *form* of the dream..." that revealed the mind, "the form of the dream is itself a content," and that form was a trope.[6]

The Tropology of Thought: Hayden White, Paul Ricoeur, Marshall Edelson

I have always thought, or perhaps felt is the better term, that Hayden White's narrative theory, understood as the container framework for

3 *Idem, ibidem.*

4 *Idem,* 103.

5 *Idem,* 102.

6 *Idem,* 123.

his tropology, was a psychologized theory at heart, a psychoanalytically-informed theory. By psychologized I mean that the large-scale analysis of the linguistic formulations underlying all modes of representation, the analysis conducted in terms of the rhetoric of the major tropes and the strenuous artifice involved in turning reality into narrative emplotment, was never about the manipulation of language alone. And his analytic approach is never limited to a superficial register of literary effects. All of what White would call the "operations" (a word that reminds us of mental activity) conducted in linguistic forms, small and large scale, were the language of the psyche-mind through and through, down to its most primary dealings with libidinal impulse in the forms of dream, fantasy, and wish-formation. White's narrative theory and its constituent components of trope elements, rest on a depth psychology dealing with expression and symbolization. The dream is one level of the same operations that, under the control of consciousness and rational intention, issue in the complex narratives of fiction and history. The reverberations of a psychoanalytic depth psychology should register on any reasonably sensitive reader of White's work. It is there in his basic vocabulary and the fundamental premises of all his argument and contributes greatly to the seriousness of his work.

Hayden White's profound appreciation of Freud's hermeneutic of the mind's negotiations between reality and its own unconscious pressures is found everywhere in his work, more often *everywhere* than in specific passages naming and acknowledging Sigmund Freud. Although White's writings are studded with references to Freud and extended passages of explication and criticism of certain ideas (on the assumption that an intellectual of White's generation could make that all informed readers would have done some serious reading of Freud), the truest acknowledgements occur where Freud's name does not. Thus, White's discussion of Johan Gustav Droysen's concepts of history usefully invokes Freud to trace the standard of historical plausibility to a deeper place: "What is plausible, we know since Freud, is that which conscience, the distillation of social authority, tells us we should desire

against that which need or instinct tells us we do desire."[7] Here the superego makes its presence known in the realm of judgement and Freud's explicit presence in this bit of argument is apt.

In the *locus classicus* of *Metahistory* where White introduced what would become his signature topic, "The Theory of Tropes," his definition of the indispensable function of figurative language for history rests on a psychoanalytic map of the mind: the four basic tropes of Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony "are especially useful for understanding the operations by which the contents of experience which resist description in unambiguous prose representations can be prefiguratively grasped and prepared for conscious apprehension."[8] The idea that mental "operations" take place before and at a different level from "conscious apprehension" is taken for granted. Perhaps this idea is no longer taken for granted (though I think it is), but it assuredly pervades Hayden White's thought about thought. In a long footnote to that introductory discussion of the relation of tropes to historical thought, White considers a number of writers on this topic, including Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss, specifies various subtle reservations about their ideas and more emphatically aligns himself with Émile Benveniste.

> As Émile Benveniste has suggested in his penetrating essay on Freud's theory of language: "it is style rather than language that we would take as term of comparison with the properties that Freud has disclosed as indicative or oneiric language...The unconscious uses a veritable 'rhetoric' which, like style, has its 'figures' and the old catalogue of the tropes would supply an inventory..."[9]

7 Hayden White, "Historical Writing as a Bourgeois Science," in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1987), 94.

8 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1973), 30-31.

9 White, *Metahistory*, 32 n. 13.

"This," White comments, "is consistent with my contention that the similarities between poetic and discursive representations of reality are as important as the differences."[10]

Until the essay under discussion on Freud's dream analysis, published for the first time in 1999, there are few such extended acknowledgements in White's work. That essay which maps the dream work directly onto the major tropes concludes with a profound and encompassing assertion, that: "Freud's work points to the grounding of the phenomena of style in the structures of unconscious ideation and to the solution of the problem of the logic of practical discourse."[11] Note that poetics is used to address the "logic," not the fantasy, speculation, or fiction in the pejorative sense, and "practical discourse" – nonfiction, realist representation, history.

White's sense that the deep structures of dream operations and rational ideation are identical, universal and tropological in form is expressed in the question that drives one of his canonical essays, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" when he asks: "What wish is enacted, what desire is gratified, by the fantasy that real events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story? In the enigma of this wish, this desire, we catch a glimpse of the cultural function of narrativizing discourse in general..."[12] I have always felt that this statement-question revealed the deep if unstated imbrication of psychoanalytic theory with the meaning of tropology and narrative throughout White's thought. The language of wish and desire tells it. Indeed, "desire" appears variously seventeen times in the essay, as in "the conflict between desire and the law," "the discourse of desire," the real as "an object of desire."[13]

This comprehension of how psychoanalysis illuminates the deep structure of all cultural artifacts of language as originating from sourc-

10 *Idem, ibidem.*

11 White, "Freud's Tropology," 125.

12 White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in *The Content of the Form*, 4.

13 White, "Value," 12, 20, 21, and 5, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 24.

es deeper than those available to consciousness places White in a varied and distinguished company, only two of whom I wish to bring forward here because they stand so associated in my own mind, a philosopher and a psychoanalyst, both theoreticians of language. The first is of course Paul Ricoeur, arguably the most important modern philosopher of language in its complex formulations, whose career and thought tracked that of Hayden White in mutually illuminating counterpoint. One node of White/Ricoeur intersection is psychoanalysis, both explicit and implicit in their work. White distanced himself from Ricoeur on a number of issues touching politics and historical narrative but White's essay on Freud shows that he had read Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (first published in 1965, and in English in 1970) with appreciation.[14] It is probably not coincidence that both Ricoeur and White (in *Metahistory,* 1973) cite Émile Benveniste on the centrality of language in Freudian interpretation. Ricoeur quotes Benveniste to that effect in his book and, like White, notes that with respect to the language operating in dreams, "it is on the level of rhetoric rather than linguistics that the comparison should be made. Rhetoric, with its metaphors, its metonymies, its synechdochies... is concerned not with phenomena of language but with procedures of subjectivity that are manifested in discourse."[15]

Seeing that the linguistic work of subjectivity, of the mind, is most helpfully addressed with the ancient formal language of rhetoric whose domain is linguistic form and meaning was immediately clear and persuasive to White and Ricoeur both and marks a deep connection between them. White's question of "what wish... what desire" drives the "fantasy" that reality should fit narrative form is one that Ricoeur would and did recognize, and both characteristically turn to poetics to formulate answers. In the Preface to *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur points to deep parallels between metaphor (the master trope of tropes in his understanding: see *The Rule of Metaphor*) and narrative form in that

14 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

15 Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 396, 400.

both achieve a special kind of reference to reality with language that operates far beyond simple direct description, a "power of metaphorical utterance to redescribe a reality inaccessible to direct description."[16] The inexplicit not-evident similarities between disparate things revealed by their metaphoric juxtaposition are not merely poetic amusement but a level of reality not otherwise revealed. Ricoeur has no hesitation about the profundity of what tropes can reveal: "I even suggested that 'seeing-as,' which sums up the power of metaphor, could be the revealer of a 'being-as' on the deepest ontological level."[17] He could be talking about the dream-work. The condensations, displacements, and modes of representation deployed by the mind to present the unfulfillable wishes of the unconscious in the experience of the dream are all subvarieties of metaphor – the ruling tropology of Ricoeurian narrative theory.

If Paul Ricoeur's work as a philosopher led him to a psychoanalytic description of the operations of language, the work of a distinguished clinician and theorist of psychoanalysis arrived at strikingly the same place from the other perspective. I am referring to Marshall Edelson, clinical psychoanalyst and theoretician, an important figure at the intersection of analytic practice and theory, too little known among those interested in the deep sources of linguistic hermeneutics in historical and fictional literature. I don't think Hayden White or Paul Ricoeur, who assuredly read one another, ever read Marshall Edelson's work and I do not think, although I am not quite as certain on this point, that he ever refers to either of them in his writing. But this essay is about my own immediate and persistent associations with White's response to *The Interpretation of Dreams* and Edelson's understanding of psychoanalysis stands foremost here.

Referring to Marshall Edelson in an essay about Hayden White brings forward yet another instance of how many brilliant scholars, even in a boundary-crossing field like historical theory, remain unknown to us, separated as we all are by the near impermeable force

16 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol.1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), xi.
17 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, xi.

fields of specialization. I routinely, though not nearly often enough, "discover" people whose work I find newly illuminating, who are distinguished figures in some near-adjacent academic field but unknown to me. I assume that Marshall Edelson (1928-2005), a man lauded for his work on clinical therapeutics and theory by numerous psychoanalytic institutions, and recognized for his teaching and writing on psychoanalytic theory during his career of over thirty years at Yale University, is not a familiar name to those versed in historical theory. My brief introduction of him here concerns the intellectual place where the work of this distinguished theoretician of the mind meets and supports Hayden White's long held conviction of the centrality of tropological forms for the highest cultural purposes. Edelson's important work "places" White's tropology where it belongs.

Edelson recognized early on what he frankly termed a "crisis" in psychoanalytic theory. In the introduction to his 1988 *Psychoanalysis: A Theory in Crisis* (indispensable for a clear-headed understanding of psychoanalysis), he admits that "Psychoanalysis, as a body of knowledge about human beings or the human mind, has become the object of a dismissive, disillusioned, and frequently derogatory polemic."[18] He regarded this dismissal as entirely unjustified and to counter it wrote "a book on the conceptual foundations of psychoanalysis." He believed that a severe clarification and simplification of the discipline was urgently needed: "What is it about and what is it not about?"[19] In addressing the conceptual foundations of the discipline, his starting point was *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the work that compels the attention of every serious reader of Freud, and deserves the attention of every serious reader of anything. A surgically severe defender of his discipline, Edelson did not regard psychoanalysis as a general psychology of every human behavior or relationship, but most specifically "a psychology of mind" whose domain is "the symbolizing activity of the mind, because it is interested in how the capacity for symbolization is manifest-

18 Marshall Edelson, *Psychoanalysis: A Theory in Crisis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), xi.

19 Edelson, *Psychoanalysis*, xvii.

ed in constructing mental representations. Mental representations are symbolic representations."[20] A description of psychoanalysis that takes Occam's razor to the burgeoning hedge of psychologizing theory, Edelson's foundation is the hermeneutics of the dreamwork which gives the theory a domain covering "the construction of mental representations, and in the symbolic operations that form and transform such representations..."[21] The symbolic operations cited by Edelson are "condensation, displacement, translation into imagery, and iconic or metaphoric symbolization." In fact, he notes, "Psychoanalysis has been called a science of tropes."[22]

The connection I make between White and Edelson is clear enough, I think, from just these brief premises. Edelson's *Psychoanalysis* is a dense yet lucidly argued book (his style is rather in the manner of Ricoeur), covering a wide range of key topics that define psychoanalysis in relation to its proper domain and to other disciplines, scrupulous, impressive, and fascinating throughout. And too rich in its coverage to summarize here. I only point to Edelson's foundational concepts which support and validate the role of symbolization that White recognizes in complex representations of reality. Like White, Edelson places great significance on the analogy Freud drew between the dream work and language: "Freud explicitly drew the analogy between the rules of language and the dream work... In more than one place, he suggested that the dream work operated, in part at least, through a linguistic transformation of a verbal representation of the latent dream thought into a verbal representation that is capable of manifestation in imagery."[23]

Why are the processes of symbolization, the tropology that held Hayden White's interest virtually lifelong, so important? These are the mental operations that proceed from the dreams uncontrolled by consciousness out to the complex artifacts of culture where the reality

20 *Idem*, xxiii.

21 *Idem*, xxiv.

22 *Idem*, xxv. Another of his books directly on the same topic is *Language and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975).

23 *Idem*, 44.

principle and rational intention exert their strict demands over ultimate formulation. The universal operations of the dream are the same, yet made different, as those which achieve literature and history. As Edelson notes: "To understand a symbolic entity is to comprehend how it is made. To comprehend how it is made is to understand the mind that made it. To discover mind through an analysis of the modes of symbolization and their products – poetry and science, mathematics and history, religion and neurotic symptoms – is the strategy of an important group of scientists and philosophers."[24] Hayden White's recognition of the presence of classical rhetoric in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* places him among this important group.

24 *Idem*, 45.

Bibliography

Edelson, Marshall. *Language and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975.

Edelson, Marshall. *Psychoanalysis: A Theory in Crisis*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970.

White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth Century*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1973.

White, Hayden, "Historical Writing as a Bourgeois Science," in *The Content of the Form.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1987, 83-103.

White, Hayden. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in *The Content of the Form*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1987, 1-25.

White, Hayden. "Freud's Tropology of Dreaming," in *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, 101-125.

Referência para citação:

Partner, Nancy. "The Deep Content of the Form: Hayden White on "Freud's Tropology of Dreaming"." *Práticas da História, Journal on Theory, Historiography and Uses of the Past*, n.º 6 (2018): 77-88.