Let’s Talk About Postmodern History

Ewa Domanska’s *Encounters* is a collection of interviews with prominent figures in that broad study generally referred to as historical theory or theory of history. The subtitle is somewhat misleading since philosophy of history, understood in either its Anglo-American analytical sense or its Continental sense, is the concern of neither Domanska nor most of her interviewees. While some of the issues addressed by this volume are broadly philosophical (e.g. the status of truth in historical accounts, the epistemology of historical knowledge, the relation of historical fact to meaning), many are more historiographical, literary, and cultural (e.g. the poetics of written history, history as a cultural practice, the turn to anthropology in historiography).

And given the multiple notions of “postmodernity” at work in this volume along with the uncertainty of what it might mean to be “after postmodernism,” perhaps a more accurate subtitle might have been “The Theoretical Conditions of History After Metahistory.” In fact, it is Hayden White’s 1973 volume, *Metahistory*, that seems to spell the turning point in historical thought for Domanska.

The text consists of the transcription of ten interviews, plus Domanska’s concluding “self-interview,” conducted in 1993 and 1994, and arranged chronologically. Domanska is Assistant Professor of Theory of History and History of Historiography at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poland, where some of these interviews took place, although a number were conducted in the Netherlands or elsewhere in Europe. The interlocutors, with a couple of exceptions, will be well known to anyone who follows modern European cultural historiography and historical theory or is familiar with the journal *History & Theory*. They can be divided into four categories (my division, not Domanska’s): 1) historical theorists proper, that is, those who have applied a kind of literary or linguistic set of concerns to written history, a group that includes the initial three interviewees—Hayden White, Hans Kellner, and Frank Ankersmit, and perhaps Jorn Rusen; 2) cultural and intellectual historiographers, a group represented by George Iggers and Peter Burke that tends to be much more grounded in the concrete practices of contemporary historians and less concerned with the literary and theoretical questions that animate the first group; 3) literary humanists, whose concerns seem to be with the broader cultural status of history as both a form of literature and a mode of consciousness, represented here by Lionel Gossman and Stephen Bann; and, 4) erstwhile analytical philosophers of history, that is, those who developed an approach to history dominated by notions of explanation, causation and the conventions of nineteenth-century historical realism. Both Arthur Danto and Domanska’s mentor at Adam Mickiewicz University, Jerzy Topolski, were at one time (in the 1960s and 70s) concerned with analytical philosophy; since that time, the recently deceased Topolski had been influenced by the writings of White and Ankersmit, while Danto has moved away from the philosophy of history and toward the criticism and philosophy of art. English-speaking readers who do not follow *History & Theory* closely may be unfamiliar with Rusen and Topolski, whose primary...
work has been in German and Polish respectively, but the others will be known to anyone who has a passing familiarity with historical theory and European historiography.

In what appears to be an attempt by the publisher to bring this volume to a larger theoretically-inclined audience of cultural and intellectual historians, the interviews are bracketed by an introduction by Allan Megill and a postscript by Lynn Hunt. Megill’s introduction stresses the relationship between aesthetics and history found in these interviews; Hunt’s postscript considers the form of the interviews as evidence of a personalized postmodernism on Domanska’s part. Despite Hunt’s claim that Domanska’s text (or is it her text?) is untraditional by virtue of its fragmentation and its philosophy in the form of everyday dialogue, Encounters does not read like a series of fragments. There is a unity to the text as a whole, and, in fact, it is a narrative unity. The text takes the form of a quest, as Domanska pursues a distinctive set of issues through conversations with the “masters,” picking up ideas along the way, becoming enamored of certain notions, exposing her own preoccupations by returning to the same themes with different interlocutors, and finally revealing herself in the confessional self-interview; the text is Domanska’s intellectual autobiography in the form of a series of interviews.

Because Encounters is not designed as a series of formal contributions or arguments, it differs greatly from what readers might expect in a work of philosophy or historical theory. The conversational quality of the text—touching on numerous topics, but not connecting them in any serious or rigorous way—is both the central problem with Encounters and its chief virtue. In fact, because the text touches on so many issues in an exploratory way that is largely non-technical, it might very well be a good book to introduce students to some of the issues at stake in contemporary historical theory. Domanska’s voice, the style and content of her questioning, strikes me as very much the student’s voice—exploratory and engaged, alternatively sophisticated and then surprisingly naive. But her naiveté, the lack of any consistent definition of terms (“postmodernism,” “crisis in history,” “narrative turn,” “experience” are some of the more prominent recurring expressions), and the idiosyncrasy of Domanska’s own frame of reference (she is a member of the generation of Polish intellectuals who came of age in the 1980s as many ideas from the West were first finding root in Poland) makes Encounters less than ideal as a serious exploration of postmodernism in historical theory. I would recommend it for curious undergraduates and for historians who have an interest in learning more about theoretical issues, but have little background in the field.

Encounters had its origins in an interview that Domanska conducted with Hayden White; that first interview sets the tone for the entire text, particularly in its confusion over what constitutes postmodernism. Metahistory, according to White, and to Hans Kellner as well, is not postmodernist at all; White’s approach, he claims, is formalist and structuralist in nature, concerned with finding the deep poetic structure of historians’ texts rather than showing how the texts destabilize those structures and categories of analysis (pp. 26, 51-55). But it is equally clear that Domanska envisions Metahistory as the moment of history’s postmodern turn, because it is the moment of her own intellectual liberation from what she calls “scientism”—in particular the Marxist and realist conceptions of historical truth. When she read Metahistory for the first time in 1989 she found “precisely what I was looking for; a depiction of the literary and artistic face of history and ... the legitimation of the historian’s subjectivity as she strives to create her vision of the past” (p. 259). In her personal narrative, her encounter with White takes on the significance of the postmodern moment: “Living in the state of postmodern suspension, of intellectual weightlessness, I was looking for a master, for a heretic; I was hunting for a postmodernist. In February 1993, Hayden White arrived at Groningen ...” (p. 261). Besides indicating something of Domanska’s penchant for self dramatization, this passage fixes White as a kind of heretic from modernist orthodoxy. How do we reconcile this vision of White as postmodernist rebel with White’s own claim that the approach exemplified by Metahistory is modernist at its core?

Domanska doesn’t face this issue head on, although one answer seems to be that the later White of The Content of the Form (1987) is postmodernist while the White of Metahistory remains determinedly modernist. My own view is that modernism and postmodernism mean different things in the spheres of literature and language, on the one hand, and in history, on the other. Because the modernist conception of history is based on realist, empiricist and positivist conventions, any attempt to treat a work of history in terms of poetics or formal structure destabilizes its claim to represent the actual past. Metahistory as a work of literary and linguistic-based analysis is highly modernist; as a contribution to historiography and historical theory, it represents the postmodernist turn. It is the blurring of boundaries between spheres of knowledge, rather than a change in orientation within those spheres, that seems to be indicative of
the shift from modernism to postmodernism. But this is nowhere acknowledged in Encounters; instead a kind of confusion about postmodernism runs through these pages. Domanska means one thing by it (a turn away from “scientific history” and a turn toward aesthetics and narrative in the analysis of historical writing); her interlocutors often something else entirely.

This is most evident, almost comically so, in Domanska’s interview with Arthur Danto. Postmodernism, for Danto, is a general cultural condition that is manifest as an art world phenomenon (pp. 171-76). And Danto is simply not in touch with historical theory or historiography, but instead of acknowledging that he and Domanska obviously have different frames of reference, he answers her questions as if they were operating in the same conceptual universe (pp. 181-85). His is a world of analytical philosophy circa 1965 and art criticism of the past forty years. When Domanska asks him about microhistory, his answer indicates that he doesn’t know anything about it; when she refers to a crisis in history she obviously means a crisis in the discipline, whereas Danto takes her to mean a crisis in the object “history.” Given the cross purposes of this dialogue, from an editorial point of view it would probably have been best to exclude the Danto interview from the final volume. Of all the interviews here, it is the one that doesn’t “fit.” Of course, the reader would then miss the opportunity to hear Danto proclaim that “Foucault is one of the scariest human beings I know, and one of the most dangerous” (p. 182).

In fact, one of the (guilty) pleasures of Encounters lies in such snippets. The chatty nature of the text means that scholars one is accustomed to reading only in formal contexts allow themselves to say things that they would never normally publish. Hence we have Hayden White stating that Carlo Ginzburg “hates Metahistory. He thinks I am a fascist” (p. 16). Or Lionel Gossman confessing “that I only occasionally read history books out of curiosity about the way history is written” (p. 203). Gossman is too modest by half, as the level of erudition about history he demonstrates in his interview indicates. Other interviewees don’t suffer from Gossman’s modesty. Stephen Bann, for instance, is like a talkshow guest—he can’t seem to answer a question without using it as a pretext to “plug” an earlier work or a work in progress of his own. Like Peter Novick’s That Noble Dream, the appeal of Encounters lies partly in its backstage revelations. In an academic culture that has produced Lingua Franca, the People magazine of the university set, it is not surprising to find “inside dopesterism” at work, even in a sphere as abstract and apparently esoteric as historical theory.

There is a conflict in Encounters between its apparent engagement with postmodernism and its actual method. If we take postmodernism to include the linguistic turn in historiography, the commitment to discourse and representation as systems of meaning rather than transparent reflections of a given reality, and a decentring of the traditional subject matter of historical study, Domanska’s approach to intellectual history seems decidedly modernist. Her questions indicate that she believes authors to be the best guides to understanding their own works; that thought is to be explained or accounted for in terms of social experience and intellectual “influence” of other thinkers; that there is a canonical Western intellectual tradition which she and those she interviews share; and that that tradition represents the limit of the intellectual universe. Hayden White warns Domanska in the first interview that interviews will not get her a definite statement or a fixed truth, that he doesn’t believe in interviews, that the whole notion of interrogating the author as source is premised on a mistaken or naïve understanding of thought and language (pp. 34-35). Domanska is undeterred; like those admirers of Foucault who express their admiration through biography, she often seems to have missed the point of the very thing she finds attractive.

While there is much of value in the questions raised, and the general tenor of the discussions is quite high, the text is also disconcertingly naïve in a number of respects. Domanska repeatedly questions her interlocutors about microhistory and “anthropological history,” particularly the works of Carlo Ginzburg and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie as if they represent the newest “postmodern” historiography. This work, now some twenty years old, is of enormous importance in the ongoing historiographical revolution of the past half century, but it is also, as Lynn Hunt points out, committed to realist and empiricist canons of truth (p. 273). The more recent work of historians concerned with language and representation is not even on Domanska’s map. There is no “new cultural history,” no “new historicism,” no cultural studies, postcolonial history, queer theory or gender history, no social constructionism. Some of these topics are introduced by her interviewees, but they remain marginal to the central discussions of Encounters. While the attempt to connect historiography and historical theory is admirable and much needed, it also requires a deeper understanding of historiography than is evident here. Similarly, Domanska becomes enthralled with a suggestion of Frank Ankersmit’s that historical study and theory turn
away from the linguistic and the narrative, and address the notion of historical experience; she returns to this idea in virtually all of the following interviews. But the idea itself is never clarified, and she doesn’t seem to recognize that so much of the social history of the past thirty years embraced a naive notion of the recuperation of experience as its central mission. Joan Scott’s well known essay “The Evidence of Experience” provides a thorough critiques of the fixation on experience and shows the way that it has been challenged by the linguistic turn and the new cultural history, but Domanska appears to know nothing of Scott’s work.[1] Perhaps there is something to Ankersmit’s proposal, but Domanska gives us only her enthusiasm for the idea, and no attempt to analyze it critically.

The dialogues in Encounters are engaging and accessible. The thinking is not particularly deep and there are no real arguments made or developed. Certainly those familiar with the field will find nothing particularly new here. What the text does do is to bring together a number of different approaches to historical theory and thought and subject them to the continuity of Domanska’s concerns. It is a readable introduction to some of the major figures in the field—although the absence of important thinkers such as Dominick LaCapra, Robert Berkhofer and Martin Jay might lead one to question its comprehensiveness. Still, Domanska makes this an entertaining introduction to historical theory, even if her personal quest seems at times to speak more of nineteenth-century romanticism than twentieth-century postmodernism.

Note


Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.