Nahman’s turn from homiletic discourse to telling tales would, according to the American intellectual historian Hayden White (1927–), be a matter of tropology.¹ White defines ‘trope’

... as the linguistic equivalent of a psychological mechanism of defense (a defense against literal meaning in discourse...), it is always not only a deviation from one possible, proper meaning, but also a deviation toward another meaning, conception, or ideal of what is right and proper and true “in reality”. Thus considered, troping is both a movement from one notion of the way things are related to another notion, and a connection between things so that they can be expressed in language that takes account of the possibility of their being expressed otherwise (White 1978, 2).

In presenting his tropology of discourse, White draws upon the psychologist Jean Piaget. Piaget distinguishes between four “restructurations” of the perceptual field in the development of a child’s cognitive powers: the sensorimotor, the representational, operational and rational. White conceives of these restructurations as tropical because they reflect “the modalities between the child and its ‘reality’ which the modes of cognition identified presuppose” (White 1978, 6–7). During the child’s first eighteen months, the child will be experiencing similitude between its own body and the world of objects and be lacking the ability to distinguish between self and other/mother. At around eighteen months, the child experiences what Piaget called a “Copernican Revolution”, which allows the child to differentiate between itself and other objects, thus enabling the symbolizing process of thinking about and addressing objects related, yet decentralised from the subject. At the age of seven, the child obtains a kind of preadolescent logic that enables classification. Based on the perception of the objects themselves, the child will be

able to group or rearrange objects by paying attention to what common essential natures make them adhere to the same kind of totality. This ability to classify depends upon the physical manipulability of the objects, not upon reflection. At the onset of adolescence, typically at the age of thirteen, the child will be capable of logic and deductive reasoning on manipulative objects as well as on theories and propositions, which then can “serve as a check on both perception and mental operations of the earlier kinds” (White, 9). Because of the self-critical potential of this ability, this second-order view on established meaning becomes a potential platform for perceptual change.²

Despite the sequence of these stages, which reflect the diachronic development of the child’s cognitive powers, White argues that discourse is a “recapitulation of the process of cognitive development similar to the way that the child comes to a comprehension not only of his ‘reality’ but of the relation between reality and his consciousness” (White 1978, 12). The synchronic influence of the perceptual stages leads White to present his thesis:

[I]n those situations in which we might wish to break the hold of a given chain of logical reasoning,…we might consider reversion (or regression?) to a more “primitive” mode of cognition as represented by the earlier, prelogical stages in the process of development. Such a move would represent a metalogical “turn” against logic itself in the interest of resituating consciousness with respect to its environment or of reconceptualizing the relation between self and other in specifically nonlogical, more nearly imaginative ways (White 1978: 10).

White provides the modern scholar with one explanation of why Nahman would include telling tales as an additional means of communication. Purportedly, Nahman did so, to allow for the imagination to resituate his consciousness and that of his listeners/readers to make everyone reconceptualize their religious ideals, make them imagine his conception of redemption. In fact and very much in line with White’s thesis, Nahman argued systematically for his turn to telling tales in Likkutey MoHaRaN #60, which I shall return to in Chapter 2.3. The imagistic genre of tales, prelogical as it may be, enables something that theological tractates do not. Logic is pushed aside, and a much more imaginative way of conceptualizing things is achieved. However,