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PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AFTER HAYDEN WHITE. Edited by Robert Doran. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. Pp. 256.

### ABSTRACT

The title of Robert Doran's collection of essays on Hayden White proves provocative and evocative. Provocative because it claims to mark a move within philosophy that pivots on the work of Hayden White, and this despite the fact that White himself explicitly resists inclusion *within* such a classification, that is, as a philosopher of history. Indeed, another contributor, Arthur Danto, had as of 1995 declared *passé* the whole subfield of philosophy of history. Doran situates White, then, in a niche White rejects and in any case one largely abandoned by those who do academic philosophy. Thus a question that this title evokes concerns why—whatever philosophy of history happens to be *before* Hayden White—after him it becomes a topic of philosophical lack of interest, one pursued almost exclusively by those *not* associated with departments of philosophy. Given White's professional travails, his acquaintance with another undisciplined academic, Richard Rorty, and his long-standing friendship with preeminent philosophers of history such as Louis Mink, one might well assume that White eschews Doran's disciplinary labeling for a reason. In this regard, reframing him as this book's title does invites a worry that, if only unwittingly, the book elides discussion of why certain positions excite not merely disagreement but prompt rather a type of professional shunning. In failing to confront White's reception (or rather lack thereof) by historians and his position (or rather lack thereof) within philosophy, Doran passes over in silence a highly salient aspect of White's work.

*Keywords:* Robert Doran, Hayden White, philosophy of history, Hans Kellner, Gabrielle M. Spiegel, Frank Ankersmit

The title of Robert Doran's collection of essays on Hayden White proves provocative and evocative. Provocative because it claims to mark a move within philosophy that pivots on the work of Hayden White, and this despite the fact that White himself explicitly resists inclusion *within* such a classification, that is, as a philosopher of history. Relatedly, just one contributor to this volume happens to be (in terms of department affiliation, anyway) a philosopher: Arthur Danto (perhaps his last published piece before his death in 2013). Yet Danto had as of 1995 declared *passé* the whole subfield of philosophy of history.<sup>2</sup> Doran situates White, then, in a niche White rejects and in any case one largely abandoned by those in departments of philosophy. Thus a question that this title evokes concerns why—whatever philosophy of history happens to be *before* Hayden White—after him it

1. I thank Javier Cardoza-Kon, Ewa Domanska, Hans Kellner, and Hayden White for comments on an earlier draft of this essay. I alone am responsible for the views expressed.

2. Far from being unaware of this, Doran cites the relevant passage from Danto in his own introductory essay, on p. 8, fn. 26.

becomes a topic of philosophical lack of interest, one pursued almost exclusively by those *not* associated with academic philosophy? In addition, this forces the question, “Who does philosophy?”

An interesting parallel exists in regard to this last question between Doran’s proposed disciplining of White as philosopher and the late Richard Rorty. Both taught after their retirements in the Department of Comparative Literature at Stanford, and so neither in a department in which they received their academic training. No accident this, but rather symptomatic of the fact that both were regarded by many of their fellow professionals as undisciplined and so subjected to professional exile. White never received an appointment to the History Department at the University of California-Santa Cruz (he held a position in the History of Consciousness program), and Rorty, after fleeing Princeton, never again took a primary appointment in philosophy. Each became undisciplined arguably because of challenges they made to comfortable academic assumptions. Ironically, White now comes labeled as a philosopher because historians would not have him as one of their own; Rorty fled that very label because he found those claiming it too often make philosophy culturally irrelevant.

Given White’s professional travails, his acquaintance with Rorty, and his longstanding friendship with preeminent philosophers of history such as Louis Mink, one might well assume that White eschews Doran’s disciplinary labeling for a reason. In this regard, reframing him as this book’s title does invites a worry that, if only unwittingly, the book elides discussion of why certain positions excite not merely disagreement but a type of professional shunning. In failing to confront White’s reception (or rather lack thereof) by historians and his position (or rather lack thereof) within philosophy, Doran passes over in silence a highly salient aspect of White’s work. To understand the work of someone like Hayden White or Richard Rorty, surely one must account for the type of reaction their work received.

Doran, who never inquires into why White himself avoids a characterization of his work that this volume thrusts upon him, or Danto’s pronouncement of the death of the subject some two decades before, gamely pursues his announced topic. “The present volume examines ‘philosophy of history after Hayden White’ in two senses of the preposition ‘after’: 1) philosophy of history *according to* White—namely, how White completely redefined the concept of philosophy of history . . . ; and 2) what philosophy of history has become as a result of White’s interventions” (1). And, in fact, Doran’s clearly written and scholarly introductory essay to this volume nicely sketches White’s intellectual debts and relationships to many of his progenitors and successors.

Doran also makes his case here for periodizing philosophy of history in relation to White’s writings. Doran’s narrative locates White as a moralizing messenger of existential philosophy. This creates a before/after structure that suits Doran insofar as it portrays philosophy of history *before* White as a motley of competing and conflicting interests. This primacy of the moral becomes the pivot point on which philosophy of history hinges. Before White, philosophies of history typically focused either on broad-brush teleological structures (in the manner of Hegel or Marx) or formal considerations of what makes for scientific

explanation (in the manner of Popper or Hempel). But if philosophy of history so conceived *before* Hayden White imagined itself in a search for structure that a historian *discovers* and then *records*, philosophy of history *after* Hayden White lies in the recognition that historians by their *narrative choices create* such structures. In this respect, after White, while the form of the content—narrative—can be subject to analysis, the content of the form will be dictated by noncognitive commitments of historians. Their hearts have reasons that reason cannot know. By locating White in a series of moments in which his writings come after Heidegger's and Sartre's, and by emphasizing (in the manner of Herman Paul's fine book<sup>3</sup>) White's conviction of the unavoidable moral choices made in any writing of a history, Doran places White within a clear philosophical lineage.

Yet Doran's account deviates significantly from those of others who have charted this area in that it does not feature as a driving force molding contending conceptions of philosophy of history the dialectic generated by conflicting conceptions of the *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften*. As a result, and oddly for a student of narrative theory such as Doran, his recounting provides no plot. Nothing accounts for the various movements and developments within philosophy of history as they precede and succeed White's work. Doran offers in this regard only a chronicle. This might suggest that academics simply incorporate White's contributions and then move on.

What then does it mean to suggest that Doran's essay, scholarly though it may be, actually elides discussion of White's influence? Because Doran constructs a mere chronology of where White's work occurs, he saves himself the trouble of having to seriously confront those aspects of White's work that proved deeply disruptive. The absence of a plot masks this because Doran's chronicle does not record White's shunning, and so makes unnecessary any consideration of why his work to this day remains largely excluded from the canon in both history and philosophy. Historians do not read this work because as a profession, history (at least in the US) remains resolutely resistant to seriously considering White's challenge to its professional self-image.<sup>4</sup> Philosophers, likewise heavily invested in a view of their subject as untainted by any serious considerations time and place, take White at his word, that is, that he does not do philosophy, and so with consciences untroubled leave him unread. But none of this persistent failure of White's work to readily accommodate to typical academic classification, to qualify as neither the raw nor the cooked, appears as an event of which Doran takes note.<sup>5</sup> Readers of White appreciate that his resistance to being classified

3. Herman Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011).

4. See Richard T. Vann, "The Reception of Hayden White," *History and Theory* 37, no. 2 (1998) 143-161.

5. Again an interesting and important parallel can be drawn between White and another "rebel with a cause," namely, Thomas Kuhn. Just as *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* enshrines a conference-long mugging of Kuhn at the hands of irate Popperians, so too does *Probing the Limits of Representation* capture a public scolding of White at the hands of his fellow professionals. Kuhn becomes normalized in philosophy by treating history of science, like the history of philosophy (or, heaven forefend, the sociology of science), as separate and distinct from philosophy of science. Normalizing White similarly proceeds by letting pass unremarked that the uptake of his work lies in academic areas other than those he confronts, and so virtually assures that it will have no discernible impact on historical practice or philosophical reflection. Such disciplinary compartmentalization allows academics have their cake and eat it too.

as a philosopher reflects the complaint Marx famously voices in the eleventh of his *Theses on Feuerbach*. So despite what can be learned from Doran's essay, it reads in the end rather like a précis of the writings of Marx that makes no mention of any politics or revolutions.

The essay "History as Fulfillment" represents White's own contribution to this volume (excluding his terse "Comment" that concludes the collection, and which, apart from a brief aside regarding Danto, does not directly address any of the essays). White has remained "on message" throughout his long and productive career. White reasserts in this essay precisely the narrative line regarding how theory of history develops that Doran omits, that is, an aporia that explains what has moved debate about historical representation since questions about history's status as a science first arose in the nineteenth century. Indeed, without reference to this narrative, it would be a complete puzzle as to why White's intervention in this debate proves so disruptive.

As White recognizes and appreciates, the question "What is history?" arises largely because of and in tension with the question, "What is science?" and that conceptions of the latter influence and provide counterpoint for discussion regarding the former. By virtue of his own emplotting of what shapes post-structuralist debate on the nature of historiography, White postulates a chief point of friction in that debate, and why in particular his intervention (though he does not name it as such) resists normalization.

But for historians—at least for those who took any interest in such theoretical matters—the collapse of the distinction between the form and the content of their accounts raised the threat of formalism, anathema to both the Left and the Right of the ideological spectrum. If a historical process was identifiable by its form and if this form was that of the narrative, how could one distinguish between historical and fictional, or for that matter, "mythical" narratives? The response of the leading professional historians was to moot this question by appeal to the authority of the rules and procedures honored as properly historiographical in nature by "the community of professional historians." The relativism implied in this investiture of authority in "the" community of professional historians to decide what was and what was not a proper historical method or mode of representation was to be blocked by . . . an openness to all theories of history that did not feature a frivolous or nihilistic approach of the kind supposedly caused by "the linguistic turn" in the human sciences. (40)

Note how White alludes in passing to "the collapse of the distinction between the form and content" of historical accounts. Yet he engineered just this collapse. And as he insists, this denies to all, whatever their political inclinations, an explanatory standpoint that can claim itself neutral with respect to its treatment of some body of evidence, however that term is understood. Because they resist acknowledging this, historians remain prey to "the fetishism of literalness that has burdened the historian's profession since it cut itself off from its tradition as a literary or discursive practice and began to aspire to the status of a 'science' of the 'concrete'" (44-45). As a result, "historical studies became systematically blinded to the fact of its own discursive nature, its status as a practice of 'composition,' and its irredeemable tropological methods of constituting its objects of study" (45). In short, if a "philosophy of history" requires mapping a logic of history (à la Hegel or Marx) or a logic of explanation (à la Hempel or Danto), then

there can be no philosophy of history. For “the logic of narrative representations of the world . . . is a logic of figures and tropes, which is not a logic at all” (45). In short, whatever philosophy of history might have been *before* Hayden White, *après lui, le déluge*.

White repeatedly emphasizes that questions of form and content cannot be properly distinguished, and indeed as just noted he situates his self-understanding precisely in the context of debates fomented by that contention. Thus it comes as a surprise to find Frank Ankersmit’s contribution, “A Plea for a Cognitivist Approach to White’s Tropology,” proposing to read that very distinction back into White’s work. Ankersmit declares that “relatively little attention was paid to tropes as such, and, especially, to the question of how tropological utterances . . . relate to the world” (47). But, reading what White says, he does not neglect a separation of figuration and “the world” as studied by historians. Rather, White explicitly *denies* that “the logic of figures and tropes” is a logic at all, and does so because he finds no meaningful distinction here. Relative to the sense of the term “logic” clearly in play here, White rejects claims that historical representation can be understood in terms of semantics, that is, truth-preserving inferential relationships. So when Ankersmit poses as a puzzle how to reconcile “literal truth” and figural emplotment, and does so in the guise of resolving a problem that “White never addresses” (49), charity suggests that there can only be a deep disconnect between the problems as Ankersmit imagines them and those as posed by White.

A hint of where the disconnect resides emerges in Ankersmit’s identifying tropes as plot types. This allows him to position tropes (at least on his reading of White) as applying only to whole texts, and thus to preserve at the level of single statements a distinction between literal and nonliteral language. Statements so conceived retain their logical candidacy for being true or false, while historical texts so imagined blend the literal (in the form of statements) and the figural (at the level of plot).

Ankersmit proposes a notion of “semantic friction” to distinguish between his imagined transparency of fact-stating discourse and the “semantic tension” he claims is introduced by nonliteral (for example, metaphorical) statements. Without argument, Ankersmit takes it for granted that “John is a pig” (his example) involves cognitive “effort” in a way that statements such as “The cat is on the mat” do not. Histories, Ankersmit maintains, marshal the literal in the service of the figural. That is, having conjured from his armchair “semantic friction” as a problem—“All of the tropes start with semantic friction, and *all* of the tropes then require us to make sense somehow of the figural utterance” (49)—he then can insist it needs a solution: “*all* [the tropes] raise this problem of how to reconcile the semantic friction of figural language with the absence of friction in, and the smoothness of, the historical text” (49). But for the sake of argument, let us leave aside work in philosophy and in linguistics that explicitly denies the semantic friction Ankersmit asserts, claiming instead the very sort of pervasiveness and transparency for metaphor that Ankersmit assumes for literal discourse, as well as questions regarding just what makes for literalness.<sup>6</sup>

6. A celebrated text in this regard is George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

Ankersmit's distinction requires before all else a view of language such that a competent speaker knows (by what markers Ankersmit does not say) which statements count as fact-stating and which not. And therein lies the rub. Ankersmit chooses to put the point that constitutes his imagined insight as follows: "when analyzing the relationship between statement and the text, we always move from the former to the latter. . . . But tropology . . . invites us to explore, for a change, the opposite route as well and to ask ourselves how the text may affect sentential meaning. This would add a new dimension to contemporary philosophy of language" (50).<sup>7</sup> That is, according to Ankersmit, the "cognitivist moment" absent from White's tropology consists in detailing this interplay of the literal and figural. "So what happens to truth when you move from the level of the literally true individual statement about the past to the historical text relating to the past in a tropological way?" (51). That is, how does one logically assess the semantic contribution of the literal to the figural?

Ankersmit takes his discussion of White on Burckhardt to be indicative of the unappreciated problems of assessing the relation between literal and figural discourse at many levels of relevance to historians. In what sense does Burckhardt represent something called "The Renaissance"? Is that something a something to be observed? If it is, where is it? In what sense does it name, that is, refer to a something? White, in his closing reflections on Danto's narrative sentences, proves quite alive to the elusive nature of the so-called literal when it comes to a statement such as "Petrarch's climbing of Mount Ventoux opened The Renaissance" (212).<sup>8</sup> By characterizing an earlier event by reference to a later one, what Petrarch did, although true now of when he did it, could *not* be observed or known to be true when Petrarch did it. As White remarks, "this 'Renaissance' was not constituted as a 'historical' reality until the writing of Jules Michelet and Jacob Burckhardt" (213). The fact that Petrarch did what he did simply had no truth-value relative to the opening of the Renaissance at the moment his action occurs, and the truth-value of the statement simply cannot be assessed in isolation from how one connects it to a developmental sequence. Insofar as historians constitute the reality of events that they write about, it just completely misconceives the semantic relation of this statement to its context to try to explicate its truth-conditions by appeal here to "literal" truth.

The notion of "literal" truth sometimes also catches the fancy of those who imagine that assembling a sufficient number of facts decides a historical interpretation. But this naïve Baconianism has no place in any serious discussion of historical theory. The problem facing such discussions arises precisely because of an inability of facts, however construed, to settle their interpretation. In this crucial respect, narrative sentences (among many others) simply elude inclusion in Ankersmit's dichotomy, and that dichotomy holds no promise of providing

7. Despite saying this, Ankersmit remarks three pages later that "metaphor has been intensively discussed and its cognitive potentials widely recognized and explored since Max Black's influential essay on metaphor. The philosopher of science Mary Hesse even reversed the whole traditional argument about metaphor by arguing not that metaphor conveys literal truth but there is a metaphorical dimension to what at first sight seem to be true literal statements" (53). So what then can be Ankersmit's "new dimension"?

8. In fact, as White appreciates, Danto uses this very sentence as an example of a narrative sentence.



any possible insight concerning the semantic/logical relation with respect to statements and figurations.

Ankersmit's invocation of a notion of cognitivism, as noted at the outset, *contrasts* with White's claim that no logic in just that sense governs narrative. More important, the foregoing discussion serves to establish that Ankersmit has no clear problem. The so-called problem of "semantic friction" lacks plausibility, appeal to literal truth proves quite naïve, and the quest for a semantics of statements and plots misconceives that relation. In the end, then, puzzling out what Ankersmit's plea for a "cognitivist approach" is actually advocating requires making intelligible a claim such as the following. He characterizes historical texts as functioning as metaphors, and so he concludes that to "see A as if it were B" would, on his "cognitivist" reading, imply that "A stands for a part of the past, for the world *itself*, whereas B stands for the historical text. In that case, we shall have pulled the world itself, or part of past reality itself, into metaphor" (64). Italicizing "itself" here marks the critical move Ankersmit imagines himself to make—signaling the magic moment at which the literal and the nonliteral unite. But this cannot possibly, *contra* Ankersmit, offer further insight into the supposed semantic/logical relationship of A to B. B *never* has a semantic structure (in the logically relevant sense of semantics) that A supposedly does. So it proves misconceived from the outset to ask how A logically bears on B. That is, a cognitivist approach implies an ability to make rational assessments in terms of logically specified truth-conditions. But "facts" do not determinately fix or establish truth-values, as Ankersmit assumes, even at the level of statements, and so no cognitivist approach can succeed or proceed as he suggests. Conceived of in Ankersmit's terms, cognitivism ceases before it starts.

"'What is truth?' said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer. Pilate was in advance of his time."<sup>9</sup> Like Austin, Mieke Bal's "Deliver Us from A-Historicism: Metahistory for Non-Historians" explores in Whitean spirit what results when one denies supposedly clear or comfortable binaries. As she notes, in *Meta-history* White's "categories are so clearly readerly devices, hints for establishing contexts and connections, rather than rigid grids, that I would venture to say that his 'system' of foursomes, in its invitation to disobey it, virtually contains its own historicization, but one that is established in the present" (70). She then explores in this spirit works of art that play with and challenge standard binaries.

Perhaps unsurprisingly because of Danto's link to aesthetics, Bal's characterizations suggest a relationship to Danto's notion of a narrative sentence, but this time as applied to a work of art. "The becoming of an artwork implies a retrospective temporal logic according to which each new moment of viewing recasts the terms in which the previous encounter with the work could be understood. Each new phase of that becoming is informed by a later work that retrospectively glosses an earlier work. Each work puts a spin on the ensemble of what came before it. It is this retrospective impact that is the point of my discussion" (85). In short, she insightfully and surely correctly suggests that one's understanding of what counts as a work of art, and how it counts as art, involves a retrospective

9. "Truth," in J. L. Austin, *Collected Papers* (New York: Oxford, 1970), 117.



perspective. Lacking a familiarity with Bal's writings and the theoretical topics in art that concern her, I hesitate to say much more about this essay. But in her concern to apply lessons learned from White in general, and from *Metahistory* in particular, to the "reading" of artworks, to understanding how structuring what one perceives changes over time and so affects and alters perception, Bal points to a novel application of White's work to aesthetics.

Karyn Ball's "Hayden White's Hope, or the Politics of Prefiguration" offers fiery counterpoint to Ankersmit's placid plea. Where Ankersmit somehow imagines himself able to reinscribe a logic into a relationship from which White finds it erased, Ball takes up the cudgel against Ankersmit's reading of White. She chooses to do this, unfortunately in my view, by framing her discussion in Kantian terms. The choice proves unfortunate not because these terms lack any applicability to White's project, but because this framing distracts in the end from her point, which can be put without reference to any Kantian apparatus.

The concern that Ball brings to the fore nicely highlights what many have found disruptive about White's work, and so has fed resistance to disciplining it, that is, assimilating it to historical practice. As Ball puts it, she reads White as "urging historians to avow, once and for all, the risks of interpretation by (finally) taking responsibility for their preconscious political, moral, and *creative* desires" (90). She italicizes the term "creative," I suggest, and logically conjoins this (by using the term "and") to the political and the moral because "White's conception of prefiguration . . . subverts the distinction between imagination and understanding in historical symbolization" (90). That is, *contra* any purported cognitivist conception of tropology, the writing of history does not make rational one's political and moral choices, but can only rationalize them. Doing this, Ball argues, encourages the re-enchantment of history, which is to say to see it as a vehicle of hope for something better and yet nonetheless not tied to some failed scheme of utopian politics. As she puts it, "To urge historians to divest the mimetic illusion is to call upon them to acknowledge the inevitability of prefiguration as a professional blind spot and to affirm their creative agency as writers with the capacity to shape the self-understanding of communities" (98).<sup>10</sup> By shaping self-understanding, historians find themselves in a position to use an account of a past as a blueprint or guide for the future, a future that first appears as an option only by presenting the past in a particular way.

Ball's generally clear and well-argued account concludes with a discussion of a "post-political" position that she identifies in White. "Over and against Jameson's Marxist commitment to historical consciousness as a cause in its own right, White celebrates modernist experimentation as a repudiation of an 'outdated' politics that leans on a redemptive plot" (232). She frequently cites White's 1982 essay, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation." Her point regarding the post-political, somewhat obscured by her digressions into Kantian aesthetics, can be put as follows. An analogy between politics and

10. See again her remark on p. 103: "White's existentialist aestheticism vouchsafes the prospect that a persuasive interpretation can bring about a different future, one that can be hoped for, but not fully imagined." Unfortunately, of course, such "persuasive interpretation" can be found on outlets as different as MSNBC and Breitbart.

aesthetics serves to underline the fact that the future cannot be *known*. No teleology informs historical change, no model permits prediction of a political future from a political past. At best, one can imagine a better future, and *then* do what one hopes will bring that about. Hope does not equate to prediction; nonetheless, it can provide a template for action. “White’s hope for historiography hinges on the non-teleological promise of aesthetic reflection as an analog for an open future” (106). Or, again, “understanding becomes ‘deceptive’ in Kant’s sense, as historians seek to endow their choice of form with the authoritative force of empirical necessity by insinuating that any rational subject would intuit evidence in the same way” (107). In this respect, art encourages us not to acquiesce to philosophies, politics, and aesthetics that encourage us to view things passively, as though we can only be observers.

Arthur Danto contributes a primarily reflective autobiographical piece that fits oddly with the volume. Although Danto contributed significantly to philosophy of history, he also abandoned the field at the time of publication of *Metahistory*, though no reason exists to believe this conjunction other than coincidental. Despite Doran’s efforts in his introductory essay to effect a rapprochement between Danto’s thought and White’s, Danto’s self-understanding remains firmly rooted in philosophy of history as it was *before* Hayden White. Had Danto used the occasion of this volume as a moment to reflect on why, after his own well-received book on the topic, he wrote so little on it, the shape of contemporary philosophy of history might be better understood. But that did not happen.

Harry Harootunian’s “Uneven Temporalities/Untimely Pasts: Hayden White and the Question of Temporal Form” offers a theoretically dense reading of White’s work that claims to challenge White’s conception of temporality. In this regard, Harootunian formulates his concern about White as follows.

[B]oth Ricoeur and White come close to identifying narrative—the form of emplotment—as a cognitive endowment. Yet in doing so, they risked subordinating the force and form of historical time to narrative space and an irreducible linearity that marked the unfolding of story-line, resulting in the closing off of any real possibility for historical comparisons other than the recounting of a blank and homogenous seriality of successive moments denoting a before and after. (130)

Given White’s repeated exhortations to historians to utilize literary devices, and the prevalence of variations upon and rejections of “homogenous seriality” in contemporary literature, one must regard Harootunian’s charge with puzzlement if not suspicion. One does not find, in any case, any close reading of White’s extensive oeuvre that documents much less sustains this charge. This essay, although chock-a-block with references to a multitude of works, does not provide its reader with any clear sense of the alternatives as Harootunian imagines them.

Hans Kellner has long been one of White’s most perceptive readers, and his “Hopeful Monsters or, the Unfilled Figure in Hayden’s White Conceptual System” does not disappoint in this regard. It also serves, surprisingly, as a way of linking philosophy of history before and after White. Surprising not because one did not expect this sort of insight from Kellner; of course, one did. Rather, the surprise here consists in the fact that Kellner, yet another nonphilosopher (if disciplinary affiliation defines one in this regard), not only locates why White’s

effort counts as philosophical, but also identifies a key philosophical concept—Danto’s device of narrative sentences—that White transforms and makes his own. In doing this, Kellner betrays no awareness of the philosophical lineage involved. But that does not detract from the insight he provides.

To begin, how does Kellner identify philosophical impulses animating White’s work? White’s intellectual development, he maintains, has been “driven by the force of the conceptual proposals he has offered” (151). Kellner formulates a neat and pithy summary of White’s complex conceptual intervention in historical theorizing, one that has definitively shaped that field for well over four decades.

White’s desire to see things from a higher point of view, his tactic of moving up to a higher level of abstraction to grasp and better characterize a complex field of phenomena, found its first major expression in the tropes. Operating at a higher level than the field of historical discourse they were meant to clarify . . . White was not reluctant to extend his ideas to narrative in general. . . . [I]n time, the language of the tropes virtually disappeared from White’s work, to be replaced by a discussion of emplotment. No longer simply a way of categorizing plot-forms . . . , emplotment became an ideological device of narrative, always forcing coherence (even by giving form to incoherence) on the events it presents. In this sense, emplotment . . . is rather, as White recognized, the ideological content of narrative form and the fulfillment of the promise provided by the tropes as narrative structures.<sup>11</sup> (151)

As stated, this concise and apt summary contains nothing surprising.

But Kellner’s next move does, and just here I take some small exception while also noting an important insight Kellner captures. This concerns the role that the notion of figuralism plays as it emerges in White’s thought. Kellner puts it this way.

From the study of emplotment, White moved on to the mechanism by which emplotment . . . produced meaning and overcame non-meaning. This happens by way of a special form of explanation, a form that was neither genetic, nor logical, nor physical but rather uniquely humanistic. It is called figuralism. Figuralism, as White describes it, is a special form of explanation, in which a later event calls forth and names an earlier one which is then deemed to have somehow “caused” the later phenomenon. This is how emplotment functions: the conclusion of the narrative establishes and fixes the plot of the work, . . . and that emplotted outcome will not only establish the meaning of the whole, but will also assign to each of the parts of the story its significance as a figure to be fulfilled by a later event. (152)

In stark contrast to Ankersmit’s reading, Kellner underlines that the meaning relationship runs from the whole to the parts, and so determines the semantic relationship.

My niggling worry involves how Kellner understands White’s attitude toward the notion of explanation. Elsewhere I argue that White relegates concerns about explanation to the role of a secondary effect of emplotment.<sup>12</sup> He does this

11. Compare: “It is therefore, the ‘eye on the whole’ which distinguishes the philosophical enterprise. Otherwise, there is little to distinguish the philosopher from the persistently reflective specialist; the philosopher of history from the persistently reflective historian. To the extent that a specialist is more concerned to reflect on how his work as a specialist joins up with other intellectual pursuits, than in asking and answering questions within his specialty, he is said, properly, to be philosophically-minded.” Wilfrid Sellars, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” in *Science, Perception, and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 3.

12. Paul A. Roth, “Hayden White and the Aesthetics of Historiography,” *History of the Human Sciences* 5, no. 1 (1992), 17-35.

because at the time that White was writing, philosophers closely tied explications of explanation to a view of logical form imputed to the natural sciences. Since White recognized (as his contribution to this volume still insists) that such “formalist” notions of explanation hold no value for historians, he turned his attention elsewhere. Thus what little White says directly about “explanation” as a conceptual matter has it as a result of the plausibility of stories, and not (as philosophers then would maintain) the other way around.<sup>13</sup> That is, I would suggest, figuralism develops White’s alternative to any analysis of explanation, an expansion of his views regarding how emplotment replaces explanation as philosophers construe that term.

Now in fairness to Kellner, he follows White in characterizing the figural as representing a form of causation distinctive to history. In his reflections on Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, White attributes to Auerbach the formulation of a “distinctively historical mode of causation I propose to call figural causation.”<sup>14</sup> “Causation” is, as White well knows, associated with “explanation” as the term is used as a *contrast* to “understanding.” White goes on to expand on his thought by adding that the “linkage between historical events of this kind is neither causal nor genetic. . . . The relationships between the earlier and the later phenomena are purely retrospective, . . . established from the point in time experienced as a present to a past, not, as in genetic relationships, from the past to the present.”<sup>15</sup> But Kellner’s exposition of White—and a philosophically very significant point to note here—makes explicit a connection between Danto’s notion of a narrative sentence and that of White’s figural causation. Danto’s narrative sentences do exactly what White identifies figural realism as doing, that is, specifying a role or significance of an earlier event in light of what has been learned later.<sup>16</sup> This attributes to an earlier event a role in a *developmental* sequence, and so a causal role ascertainable *only retrospectively*.

Danto’s notion of a narrative sentence stands as one of the most fundamental insights to emerge from analytical philosophy of history in its brief professional life. But given Danto’s own Hempelian inclinations regarding explanation, and despite important related conceptual innovations pioneered by Louis Mink, the great work by Danto and Mink has lain undeveloped. White knows and appreciates all this, and so complains, “the notion that narrative explains events by ‘configuring’ them as stories is still too general to aid us.”<sup>17</sup> So quite *unlike* Danto,

13. For a clear statement of White’s own understanding of the problem of explicating explanation, one that embeds it straightforwardly in the debate that arose in the late nineteenth century, see his “Formalist and Contextualist Strategies in Historical Explanation,” in H. White, *Figural Realism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 43-65, but especially 43-46 and 52.

14. “Auerbach’s Literary History,” in *Figural Realism*, 88.

15. *Ibid.*, 89.

16. An example I have used elsewhere is: “The destruction of the Jews was thus no accident. When in the early days of 1933 the first [German] civil servant wrote the first definition of ‘non-Aryan’ into a civil service ordinance, the fate of European Jewry was sealed.” Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, vol. III, revised and definitive edition (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), 1044. I develop this example in “Essentially Narrative Explanations,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 62 (April 2017), 42-50. For a more general account of narrative sentences, and the contributions of Danto and of Mink, see my “Analytic Philosophy of History: Origins, Eclipse, and Revival,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 37, no. 2 (2016), 351-374.

17. “Storytelling,” in *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory 1957-2007*: Hayden White, ed. Robert Doran (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 282.

who never thought to elevate narrative *per se* to the level of explanation, White does suggest how *retrospective* reconstruction allows a conjoining of events so as to suggest causal relations and developmental coherence, in short, explain. But White's use of resources drawn from literary theory virtually insures that most philosophical ears will remain deaf to what White has to say.

Kellner, having identified an important link between pre-Whitean and post-Whitean notions of explanation, then suggestively develops this in relation to White's politics. Kellner also acknowledges a point otherwise conspicuous by its absence in many of the other discussions in this volume, namely that there "has always been something scandalous about Hayden White, something that brought forth excess hostility" (154). As noted in discussing this issue with regard to White's own essay in this volume, this "excess hostility" plausibly links to White's refusal to provide ideologues of any stripe with anything but rationalizations. But this does not make White's position apolitical. Rather, as Kellner observes, "What I am suggesting is that the notion of figuralism that is the basis of narrative understanding and of historical reasoning, as White describes it, has a messianic anticipation at heart" (162). This he likens to a "hopeful monster," "a mutant that survives and may lead to a new species" (162). Of course, evolutionary development stands as exactly the sort of context where one learns only retrospectively what genetic variations survive, and what their consequences turn out to be. This developmental analogy extends in a clear way to political choices. "Any event may become a figure, but that cannot happen until it is fulfilled, somehow, for some reason" (162). The owl of Minerva takes flight only at dusk.

As her title intimates, Gabrielle Spiegel's "Rhetorical Theory/Theoretical Rhetoric: Some Ambiguities in the Reception of Hayden White's Work" takes as its point of departure the fraught yet underexplored question of the hostility that White's work incited. She complicates this question of reception in an interesting and important way. As Spiegel notes, *Metahistory* appeared the same year as Clifford Geertz's celebrated collection of essays, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Moreover, both White and Geertz acknowledge and draw upon the work of Northrop Frye. But as she goes on to note, the powerful influence of an essay such as "Deep Play" could be attributed to the fact that it proved to be, quoting Spiegel quoting Geertz, "'preadapted to some of the most advanced varieties of modern opinion'" (172). In contrast, as Spiegel documents, White makes his theoretical message much murkier. White does not propose the historiographical equivalent of a "semiotics of culture" but more a theoretical frame that hovers uneasily between contemporary post-structuralism and neoclassical rhetoric. The tension consists in the fact that an emphasis on post-structuralism pulls in the direction of a general view of cognition, while a focus on rhetoric underscores specific associations with literary theory. As Spiegel incisively puts matters, "rhetoric is primarily a theory of how language works, rather than of what language *is*" (173). Since a stress on rhetoric underlines connections with the writing of fiction, that link predictably proves to be one that historians strongly resisted.

Spiegel claims that "the ambiguities in his treatment of language . . . led to both a rejection and an acceptance of his narratology" (174). Now a reason for rejection, as Spiegel hints, turns on how historians read White with regard to

reference. This, she suggests, is “the core question for all historians, who are compelled to investigate an absent past primarily through the language the past itself generates” (174). In their anxieties about their scientific status, historians do not wish to see themselves as the “authors” of the very events that they write histories of. This smacks of a relativism of the worst kind, that is, one where the very notion of evidence fails to secure common ground.<sup>18</sup> “In short, the question was: at what point does the prefiguring operation of the tropes begin, and are they constitutive, as well as ordering, of the historical record that makes up the content in the form of the historical account?” (175; see also 176). In any case, no serious student of White’s thought can fail to carefully attend to ambiguities that Spiegel notes in White’s own formulation of his position, and how she situates White’s theoretical interventions within contemporaneous debates.

In the final section of her essay, Spiegel takes up the issue of relativism and how that charge plays out at the theoretical level in White’s work, including of course discussions of the Holocaust. This too highlights an important parallel between White and Rorty, and locates a deep source of resistance to their work. Her discussion also represents a *tour de force* regarding both the supposed philosophical substance of what allegations of relativism come to as well as White’s various responses to it. Spiegel makes plain how disruptive at many levels White’s theoretical interventions prove to be, and so why they resist any ready disciplinary assimilation.

Richard Vann’s “Hayden White and Non-Non-Histories” offers a sly perspective on histories written after, and plausibly under the influence of, White’s work. In this respect, although it does not fit straightforwardly with the announced title of the book, Vann speculates about how White’s repeated call for more literary experimentation in historical writing might have influenced some contemporary work, or perhaps how certain works might be read in light of White’s position. In this regard, Vann’s essay works well in tandem with Spiegel’s essay, since it helps illustrate and elaborate how factuality fares from White’s theoretical perspective.

Vann also emphasizes an aspect of White’s theorizing not present in any other essay in this collection, namely the relation “between social memory and infantile trauma,” and a historian’s role in shaping that link. Although not discussed, one might imagine a work such as Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory* as exemplifying the sort of history of what White terms a “modernist event,” one where attempts at representation beggar any conventional means to do so. When speculating about how to represent such events, White introduces the term “non-non-histories.” Vann drily observes that although “not exactly one of the glories of our language” (186), nonetheless “it could help us find our way amidst the remarkable flowering in the last ten years of books by historians and others that [quoting White] ‘deal with historical phenomena and . . . appear to fictionalize, to a greater or lesser degree, the historical events and characters that serve as their referents to history’” (186). Vann carefully distinguishes in this context

18. There exist strong parallels here to aspects of the “cultural wars” that raged (rage?) and similarly pitted sociologists of science and their friends against selected philosophers of science and scientists.



the sense of “fictive” as the constructed as distinct from the sense of “fiction” as imaginary (unreal).

Vann proceeds to explore various examples where writers, be they classified as novelists or professional historians, stylistically transgress any imagined boundary between history and fiction by using one to illuminate the other. As he observes,

“Non-non-histories” can tentatively be described as, at the very least, fictional, as having an attitude towards information that sees invention or make-believe as more legitimate . . . , but also as conveying so much insight into the past as to leave the boundary between the fictionalized and the historical insubstantial. Many of the techniques employed depart radically from some basic tenets of orthodox academic historiographical practice. . . . Yet they present a perspective on the real . . . that is so thoroughly informed by acquaintance with that past that it is not appropriate to dismiss them simply as unhistorical. (192-193)

But how does experimentation of this sort supposedly link to the political and moral agendas with which Vann begins his discussion? Vann concludes his essay by remarking that these “non-non-histories” “challenge conventional ways to represent the past and open up possibilities for the future, possibilities that White’s oeuvre has effectively prefigured” (199). In this, Vann strikingly echoes Kellner’s characterization of historical works as “hopeful monsters.” But unanswered still is the question of what all this experimentation ought to come to, in terms of some politics of hope.

The telling quotation that Vann cites (186, fn.10) in this regard has White contrasting “intellectual mastery,” which merely rationalizes anxiety without identifying a source or suggesting relief, and what White there terms “psychic mastery.” This recalls, perhaps intentionally, Adorno’s “What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?” Adorno famously begins that essay by worrying that what passes as “coming to terms with the past” “does not imply a serious working through of the past, the breaking of its spell through an act of clear consciousness.”<sup>19</sup> Adorno’s admonitions, with their concerns about fascism, nationalism, and the turning of people against one another, prove frighteningly apt to contemporary politics. Adorno in this regard sounds a Whitean note *avant la lettre*.

Here I choose to sidestep a question that is very difficult and burdens us with the greatest kind of responsibility: namely, the extent to which we’ve succeeded, in attempts at public enlightenment, to explore the past. . . . Essentially, it is a matter of the *way* in which the past is called up and made present: whether one stops at sheer reproach, or whether one endures the horror through a certain strength that comprehends even the incomprehensible. For this task it will, however, be necessary to educate the educators.<sup>20</sup>

And “educating the educators” surely is what White attempts to do, among other things, in exhorting them to assume in full awareness how the “past is called up and made present.”

19. Theodor W. Adorno, “What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?,” in *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 115.

20. *Ibid.*, 126.



Gianni Vattimo's "From the Problem of Evil to Hermeneutic Philosophy of History" may well challenge readers not already familiar with Vattimo's telegraphic style and Heideggerian rhetoric.<sup>21</sup> Vattimo begins his essay by damning with faint praise. "The breakdown of Eurocentrism . . . is not the invention of anyone in particular, not even of Hayden White—who nevertheless has powerfully contributed to making this rupture an explicit part of our cultural consciousness" (204). That is, Vattimo locates White as a footnote to Heidegger, insofar as the significance of White's work "assumes its full meaning only if we conceive of it within the framework of the Heideggerian ontology of Being as event" (205). Attempting to unpack Vattimo's understanding of "Being as event" would lead too far afield from the focus of this review. Sufficient unto the day will be to register a criticism of White that this connotes, for, ironically, Vattimo takes White to task for not being political enough, at least in the sense of not offering a "history of Being" that suggests obstacles that obscure or hinder Being. This recalls a criticism of White recorded earlier, one that faults him for not providing aid and comfort to a favored political teleology or narrative. As Vattimo puts this, "It may be that Hayden White, with his 'Anglo-Saxon' seriousness . . . is not disposed to consider his own work of reflecting on history as an event of the 'history of Being,' or perhaps he considers his work only potentially a revolutionary act" (207). On this view, while Vattimo gives some credit to White for helping free academic history from the dead hand of all past generations, he faults White for failing to draw any political lessons from this. Consequently, Vattimo characterizes White's writing as only potentially liberating. But as previously noted, White's existentialism challenges historians to *imagine* what a hoped-for future might be like, not to redo *historia magistra vitae* in the service of one or another philosophy or ideology. In this regard, for White to accede to Vattimo's call for a "history of Being" in service of a revolution would require White to affirm precisely what he has always denied, that is, that historians occupy a privileged perspective from which to narrate.

As some of the essayists in this volume rightly acknowledge—Ball, Kellner, and Spiegel merit particular recognition—discussion of Hayden White cannot plausibly be isolated from questions of why his work excites "excess hostility." Neither philosophy of history nor historiography can be said to in fact pivot on his work just because he remains excised from the canon in history and philosophy. Recall again the reception received by White's colleague in the Comparative Literature Department at Stanford, Richard Rorty, and the reasons both came to reside in exile there. From the standpoint of most in departments of history and philosophy, literary theories offer only caricatures of inquiry, contexts where any serious epistemology dies.<sup>22</sup> Literature departments thus become sites of exile for undisciplined thinkers such as a White or a Rorty since their teachings will then

21. I am deeply indebted to correspondence and conversations with Javier Cardoza-Kon for help in understanding Vattimo's work.

22. A once notorious remark by philosopher of science Clark Glymour captures this view. "If it is true that there are but two kinds of people in the world—the logical positivists and the god-damned English professors—then I suppose I am a logical positivist." Clark Glymour, *Theory and Evidence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), ix.

not taint those who take their charge to be uncovering “facts” or “truths.” Doran’s attempt to insert White into a disciplinary matrix—philosophy—that does not recognize his work as such fails to confront even as it implicitly acknowledges White’s undisciplining.

Does any of this mean to deny White the title of “philosopher of history”? Recall Sellars: “To the extent that a specialist is more concerned to reflect on how his work as a specialist joins up with other intellectual pursuits, than in asking and answering questions within his specialty, he is said, properly, to be philosophically-minded.” So by this standard, and I have no better, White qualifies. (Whether he wants or accepts such categorization remains entirely another matter.) He stands in a proud philosophical lineage, one arguably also originating with a philosopher punished like White because charged with making the weaker argument appear the stronger. But the issue does not concern where to slot White’s books in a library catalog, but rather how any serious discussion of his work calls for some account of their threat, indeed, to understand the importance of staying open and alert to just that voice. For those charged with “educating the educators,” it means directly grappling with whatever motivates those within a discipline to turn on one of their own. What touches an academic nerve in this way? Coming to terms with Hayden White requires an answer to this question. “We will not have come to terms with the past until the causes of what happened then are no longer active. Only because these causes live on does the spell of the past remain, to this very day, unbroken.”<sup>23</sup>

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23. Adorno, “What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?,” 129.