The Development of a Field: The Philosophy of History and The Linguistic Turn

by

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Introduction

The philosophy of history has always been an unusual field. Academically, it has perennially been on the outskirts of the more substantial disciplines to which it is attached, functioning in relation to their discourses without ever really being a part of them. Never in the mainstream of philosophy, it has also been ignored by “practicing” historians almost as a matter of tradition. Yet despite this, during the last half-century, the philosophy of history has managed to become one of the most influential areas in the academy, garnering massive amounts of interest, and playing an important role in many of the most important debates that have taken place within humanities during this time.

This success has resulted from many of the same issues that make its identity so problematic. Lacking a clear departmental allegiance, work done within the philosophy of history has been able to bridge a number of significant disciplinary gaps, becoming a major force in the creation of the interdisciplinary approach to study that is such a presence in modern academic life. By connecting historical inquiry to the theoretical tools of literary studies, the philosophy of history helped to inaugurate the linguistic turn that has transformed the American academy, bringing to power the various interpretive approaches that have been lumped together under the general description of “post-modern theory.” Although the full implications of this turn are still being sorted through, it has been an intellectual event of overwhelming importance, one that has constituted a fundamental shift in Western thought.
It cannot be this work’s goal to attempt to track these cultural dynamics in an effort to provide an explanation of the “linguistic turn” as a whole, nor even to offer an adequate description of its effects in relation to the philosophy of history. Like any truly substantial historical process, it is impossible to reduce the linguistic turn to a single definition or narrative. Moreover, it is not clear that such large scale changes function in a manner that can be understood through causal analysis. Because the linguistic turn reflected a large-scale change in the nature of intellectual culture, its overall dynamics were manifested through any number of observable occurrences and trends, and therefore cannot necessarily be traced to any single set of developments. That said, the particular reactions that individuals formulate in reaction to these circumstances can have a significant effect by altering how these dynamics are articulated, and thus changing the overall nature of the tensions that structure the period.

To a great extent, the effects of the linguistic turn are based on the ways in which it has reformulated the Western conception of knowledge, particularly in regards to the intellectual environment of the academy. One of the unique aspects of academic life is that, to a certain extent, it serves as a concrete metaphor for the structure of knowledge that it perpetuates; different departments physically enforce the boundaries between types of thinking. Thus, the clearest manifestation of the impact of the linguistic turn on these structures can be seen in the proliferation of interdisciplinary inquiry that it has enabled. Given the importance of the philosophy of history in creating the interdisciplinary spaces in which the linguistic turn could both be enacted and understood, a close examination of the field can provide
invaluable insight into the historical processes by which these much discussed events came to assume their current position.

This thesis is a history of the modern philosophy of history, covering its development from its beginning in the controversy surrounding the Covering Law Model, and following it until the present day. In the course of doing this, I will try to make the argument that, far from merely being an adjunct to history, the philosophy of history is a vital intellectual project in its own right, one with an extensive and complex history. Furthermore, I will also attempt to describe its functioning as a unified field with a clear identity, rather then a collection of independent figures whose disciplinary proper identity is based elsewhere.

Although there is much written about the philosophy of history, surprisingly little of it is actually historical in nature. Like so much about the philosophy of history, this can be traced to the complexities of its disciplinary identity. While its major figures are often mentioned in works written on the historiography of the twentieth century, these accounts are necessarily concerned with issues and developments of historians and history, As a result, they discuss the philosophy of history only marginally, mentioned the theoretical contributions that it has made to historical practice without contextualizing them in relation to the discourse in which they were actually functioned. This leads to a lack of comprehension of the dynamics within the field as a whole, and therefore makes it difficult to fully analyze the nature its most influential academic exports. On the other hand, there do exist a number of historical or semi-historical accounts written by those who are connected with the field, usually philosophers by training. While these accounts demonstrate a fuller
knowledge of the discipline as a whole, the perspective from which they write often obscures their ability to adequately analyze its historical development. Because these authors are usually engaged with the philosophy of history themselves, and they have tended to focus on the philosophical or logical progression of the field, dealing with it in terms of a developing set of arguments without considering the other elements at play within its field of discourse. Moreover, given that this writing often appears in the context of a new piece of philosophy, the historical interpretation has often been shaped by the views of the author in order to connect it to this position, resulting in a product with fairly little historical utility.

There are, of course, a few notable exceptions to this statement. Among the philosophers, there are a few who have produced excellent historical accounts of the field, most notably Arthur Danto and Frank Ankersmit\(^1\). In addition, a number of intellectual historians have done an excellent job at discussing the nature of certain aspects of the field. In this literature, the authors whose work particularly stands out are John E. Toews\(^2\), Richard. T. Vann\(^3\), and Ethan Kleinburg\(^4\). While all of these works

have been extremely useful, none of them deals with the issue in the depth necessary to more fully explicate the long-term patterns within the field. As a result, I believe that these approaches have left a fundamental gap in the historical literature on this period, one that can be rectified by the type of investigation undertaken by this thesis. Moreover, given the unique relationship that exists between history and the philosophy of history, I also believe that formulating an historical description of the development of this latter field is vitally important for the future of both. As I mentioned before, history has long had an aversion to the philosophical consideration of its nature. In large part, I believe this can be attributed to historians’ well-founded rejection of the basic relation to history implied by the disciplinary structure of the philosophy of history. Only by coming to historicize the products of this field, apprehending them as works that are limited by their context while also holding valuable interpretations about the nature of history, can the gap between the two be closed. Given the important work that continues to be done in the philosophy of history, I can only believe that such a process would greatly strengthen the practice of both disciplines.

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Chapter one- The Birth of the Anglo-American Philosophy of History

According to most accounts, the development of a body linguistically based historiographic theory/philosophy⁵ within the Anglo-American academy during the latter decades of the twentieth century is seen as being closely, if not inextricably, tied to the far broader “linguistic” or “post-modern” turn taken by the humanities and social sciences during this period. This “turn,” understood to have resulted from the introduction and widespread adoption of a body of structuralist and post-structuralist continental philosophy, is often taken as having initiated a fundamental shift in the intellectual model of western (or at least Anglo-American) thought, directly instigating the insistently self-reflexive and/or deconstructionist tendencies that have become hallmarks of the “post-modern” academy. This depiction of recent intellectual history has, for the most part, provided the widely accepted narrative backdrop for the theoretical debates that have occupied a central role in historiographic discussions since the mid 1980’s, debates that have been characterized not only by the standard rhetorical intensity of academia, but with a particularly vehement sense of threat and challenge, epitomized by the frequent descriptions of a “ruined” or “destroyed” discipline of history, and the constant

⁵ Although this issue be discussed further in the conclusion, it is important to note that I am using these terms to denote different things. Theory is the application of a methodologically rigorous interpretive strategy within a discipline, while philosophy is a discipline in and of itself. Thus, it is possible to have a theoretical history, or a theoretical philosophy, but the two occupy different categories. In this case, the possibility of confusion stems from the fact that post-structuralist philosophies were often used as theories within history.
reiteration of martial metaphors that suggests the presence of something deeper at stake.

While the description of the “linguistic turn” given above captures a certain amount of truth, it fails to recognize the extent to which there was, prior to the trans-Atlantic debut of continental theory, an “indigenous” Anglo-American philosophy of history that took as its primary focus many of the issues that are often assumed to have been introduced into the historical discourse by the French theorists. Given the clear prevalence of this later movement in respect to both its terminological and cultural presence, ascertaining the extent to which the discussions surrounding historical epistemology and textuality/narrativity were influenced by the earlier period of Anglo-American philosophy can be difficult. During the period in which historical questions formed a significant area of philosophical interest, it seems clear that little of the discussion penetrated to the actual practice of “working” historians in the way that the “linguistic turn” evidently has. Yet despite this, there can be no question that definite chains of influence do exist. Although it may garner little recognition from modern scholarship, the work done in the philosophy of history prior to the linguistic turn had a significant impact on the shape taken by European theory as it made its way into the Anglo-American academy, defining many of the basic features of the intellectual landscape that would later be recast into alternate terminology without making any major changes to their basic structures. Given this important influence, any attempt to evaluate the development of the modern philosophy of history must take this earlier work into account.
In terms of its intellectual lineage, the work done on the philosophy of history in the Anglo-American sphere emerged in the context of the then-dominant tradition of analytic philosophy. In the course of its rejection of what its proponents considered to be the unfounded metaphysical idealism of many of the major philosophical schools prevalent during the nineteenth century,⁶ those working in this tradition had begun to reconsider the epistemological position that philosophy should properly occupy, attempting to develop closer links with the empirically-based knowledge obtainable through the natural sciences.⁷ This resulted in a significant increase of interest in the philosophy of science, as analytical philosophers began to utilize the language and statement-analysis tools that they had developed to explore the logical structures by means of which scientific statements seemed capable of producing knowledge, specifically through their ability to explain events. This focus on explanation resulted from a belief that the vast majority of the previously insoluble problems in philosophy were the result of logical inconsistencies within the language used to describe them. On a closer analysis, most could be demonstrated to have been formulated in a manner that rendered them fundamentally nonsensical.

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⁶ “The analytic movement in the twentieth century philosophy was initially a reaction against the views of F.H. Bradley and the Neo-Hegelian philosophers of the preceding century…The attack against this a priori, speculative outlook on philosophy was led in the first instance by G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, who are rightly regarded as the co-founders of the analytic movement. Moore, who has been described by his contemporary C.D. Broad as having ‘not the slightest belief in the possibility of any constructive metaphysics’ introduced into philosophy a convert to discover the exact meaning of philosophically troublesome terms and expressions which persists to the present day.” T. M. Reed, “Analytic Philosophy in the 20th Century” American Libraries, Vol. 2, No. 11 (1971), 1161.

⁷ “An important consequence of the preoccupation with conceptual analysis on the part of contemporary philosophers has been the conceptual investigation by philosophers of disciplines other than philosophy…” Reed, “Analytic Philosophy in the 20th Century”, 1162.
It was this attempt to define the logical prerequisites for adequate explanation that would develop into the analytic philosophy of history. “Most of the philosophers who addressed themselves to the question had little interest in existing historical practice, either in criticizing it or in reforming it. Their interest was with the nature of logical inference. Historical explanation was of interest as the limiting case of a general model of scientific explanation.” In this way, the new “critical” or “analytic” philosophy of history was sharply differentiated from the Hegelian-style “substantive” philosophy of history that had attempted to uncover the metaphysical “meanings” behind historical events in a manner that was often considered quasi-theological. “Unlike the older ‘speculative’ or ‘substantive’ philosophy of history, the new sub-discipline was concerned not with overall interpretative schemes, but with the immanent logic of historical inquiry.” As noted before, this new analytical philosophy of history developed in a close relation to the philosophy of science, with some philosophers (most notably Karl Popper and Carl Hempel) becoming leading figures in both fields. Because of this close connection, the work produced by this movement tended to hue closely to both the disciplinary values and logical style of the sciences. Its major articles were published in journals such as *The Philosophy of Science*, and its major writers almost exclusively belonged to philosophy departments. As a result of this distance from both their disciplinary organization and actual practical experiences, the debates concerning the philosophy of history held

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little interest for most historians besides their occasional need to strongly denounce
the conclusions that it had drawn concerning their professional activities. “Jurgen
Herbst, who in the 1960’s surveyed theoretical offerings in two hundred history
departments, found concern with the philosophy of history ‘peripheral.’”11

To a great extent, the beginning of this period was marked by the 1942
While a great deal of the article’s content was closely based on the work of Karl
Popper12, Hempel presented his argument in a succinct and highly readable fashion
that, coupled with the strength and forcefulness of his basic assertions, allowed its
arguments to be easily injected into the wider discourse. In essence, “The Function of
General Laws in History” is an attempt to formulate a description of what historians
are doing when they write an account of the past that would be more accurate than the
self-understanding that the discipline was then thought to possess. This description is
therefore intimately tied to a criticism of the historical profession’s lack of theoretical
justification, particularly as it relates to their ability to adequately explain the
occurrences of the past through their research and writings.

Hempel argues that historians have claimed that their primary goal is a
detailed investigation into the nature of specific and unique past occurrences, “a
description of particular events of the past rather than with the search for general laws
which might govern these events.”13 However, whenever historians attempt to go

beyond a purely static description, and claim any sort of causal or explanatory connection between various facts about the past, they are by necessity utilizing some kind of “general law,” regardless of whether or not they realize they are doing so. Hempel characterized a valid description as possessing three separate elements, each of which needed to be fully articulated: an event/object whose action is to be explained and described (referred to as the explanandum), the antecedents/causes that also need to be described (the explanans), and the “general laws” whose universal applicability allows not only a valid causal connection to be drawn between the two, but a necessary connection such that the explanandum could not have occurred without the existence of the explanans. Hempel argued that historical descriptions/explanations utilize this basic structure, even if they only do so implicitly. “Particularly such terms as ‘hence,’ ‘therefore,’ ‘consequently,’ ‘because,’ … are often indicative of the tacit presupposition of some general law: they are used to tie up the initial conditions with the event to be explained; but that the latter was ‘naturally’ to be expected as ‘a consequence’ of the stated conditions follows only if suitable general laws are presupposed." General laws, Hempel claims, are statements of universal and empirically testable validity that are necessary to link a description/quantification of the causes/antecedents of an event to the event itself, laws necessarily implying that “whenever events of the kind described in the first group occur, an event of the kind to be explained will take place." As stated before, Hempel firmly believed that the existence of such laws is always implied in any historical explanation, drawn on in the basic structures of 

14 Ibid, 40.
15 Ibid, 36.
thought that allows an explanation of any kind to be formulated. According to the argument put forth in “The Function of General Laws,” the important distinction to make is whether the laws being utilized are either adequately specified such that it would be possible for them (at least hypothetically) to be tested or referenced, or whether the laws being drawn on are so vague as to be essentially non-existent, and therefore lacking in any possible validity. Hempel referred to the first variety of implicit general laws as an “explanation sketch,” and admitted that, given the specific difficulties inherent in the investigation of the past, moving beyond an increasingly detailed version of such a sketch might be impossible. Although the full truth might be unreachable, such a model allowed for a system of research that was guided by the evidence itself; although an explanation sketch might be incomplete, it “points into the direction where the [more accurate] statements are to be found.” On the other hand, he rejected the second variety of historical explanation, in which the general law that served as the explanatory connection between the explanans and explanandum was so vague as to be entirely inclusive, altogether, deeming the prevalence of such explanations as a mark of the undeveloped nature of the historical discipline. “For example, the geographic or economic conditions under which a group lives may account for certain general features of, say, its art or its moral codes; but to grant this does not mean that the artistic achievements of the group or its system of morals has thus been explained in detail; for this would imply that from a description of the prevalent geographic or economic conditions alone, a detailed account of

\[16\] Ibid, 42.
certain aspects of the cultural life of the group can be deduced by means of specifiable general laws.\footnote{Ibid, 43.}

Attempting to understand the implications of this particular piece of theory from the position of the present is somewhat difficult. Given the path that both the theory and the philosophy of history have taken, it would be easy to dismiss many of the claims made by the article as entirely outmoded, a piece of overconfident empirical positivism that has little or no bearing on the present understanding of history. Yet at the same time, it is also possible to read Hempel’s work with a more nuanced eye, noting the structural similarities that many of its central ideas share with later developments. Considered in this manner, Hempel’s introduction of a particular style of analysis to the philosophy of history should be viewed as an enormously important development, one that did much to establish the basic character of the field. In his attempt to uncover the logical structure of historical explanation, he formulated an approach to philosophy of history that was focused on examining the investigative process itself, while paying little or no attention to questions concerning the nature or truth of the past. In many ways, the analytical importance of maintaining the clear division between these two aspects of history can be understood as the fundamental insight that allowed the philosophy of history to exist as a field of study in its modern form. Thus, even if the conclusions at which Hempel arrived have been widely discounted, the same cannot be said for the manner in which he approached the problems that he was attempting to solve.
Hempel’s article was widely influential, kick-starting an active philosophical debate on both the nature and epistemological grounding of historical work, and quickly assuming the position of the theoretical ground-zero around which this discussion was based. The paradigm-creating impact of Hempel’s argument meant that it almost immediately came under criticism from a variety of positions, ranging from those who agreed with its basic premises while attempting to modify specific aspects of its presentation, to others who felt that it had fundamentally misrepresented the manner in which the study and writing of history functioned and ought to be understood. Viewed from the perspective of the present, the initial stages of the debate are somewhat hard to parse, as great volumes of writing were expended on what appear to be relatively minor points of emphasis, questions that seem to concern less the validity of the theory taken as a whole than smaller questions concerning the delineation of its explanatory scope. This strange appearance is, for the most part, the result of the importance of the theoretical issues that had emerged in the discussion of what came to be termed the “covering-law model” (hereafter C.L.M.) within a larger battle for meaning within analytical philosophy in general. As a result, the positions staked out by the various participants in the debate often had wide-ranging implications that were far broader than the issues that were specifically discussed within any given text, and that were therefore both criticized and defended with a vehemence out of all proportion to what often appeared to be at stake.

18 This characterization was repeated to such an extent that Rudolph Weingartner, writing a summation of these debates for “The Journal of Philosophy,” noted that “almost every paper written on this question makes Hempel’s analysis of historical explanation its own starting point,” a statement that appears to be quite literally true. Rudolph H. Weingartner, “The Quarrel about Historical Explanation.” *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (1961), 30.
The covering law theorists\textsuperscript{19} supported a philosophical position based on the principle of the unity of all scientific knowledge, with the ultimate implication that such knowledge could be rendered, at least in linguistic terms, objective. Furthermore, this position claimed that recognizing this unity (and therefore adopting the scientific definition of knowledge) was fundamentally important for allowing historical investigation to produce true statements, something that could only be accomplished by adopting the logical approach of the sciences.\textsuperscript{20}

“The general background of the debate...had always been the question whether, from a methodological point of view, there is a point as one moves down the list [of the academic disciplines, ordered by their “scientific status” and stretching from theoretical physics to history] at which things really become quite different. In other words, it was not historiography per se but the thesis of the unity of science that was the real issue in the debate...It was believed that if the scientific nature of even historiography could be demonstrated (by declaring one C.L.M. [covering-law-model] variant or another valid for historiography), the positivists claim as to the unity of all scientific and rational inquiry would have been substantiated.\textsuperscript{21}"

For a significant majority of those involved with the issue, it appears as if at least certain aspects of the covering law were essentially impossible to refute. This is because when construed at its very weakest, the C.L.M. could be

\textsuperscript{19} They came to be known as “Hempelians”, and will sometimes be referred to as such.
\textsuperscript{20} Weingartner, “The Quarrel about Historical Explanation,” 38.
understood as stating that historians, in the act of describing the past, implicitly rely on their knowledge of certain types of universally applicable laws in order to describe their subjects, a statement that is broad as to be essentially non-debatable. As it was subjected to successive rounds of emendation and revision by both its supporters and its critics, the C.L.M. gradually assumed just such a weakened form. Foremost among these changes was the introduction of inductive explanation as logically valid. This meant that, unlike the deductive necessity described in the C.L.M.’s original formulation, in which an acceptable explanation required that the occurrence of the event being described was logically necessary given the presence of the conditions or factors that made up the explanandum, it was now acceptable to claim that the collection of explanatory factors were merely sufficient for the event to have occurred. As can be seen from this example, while certain elements of the covering-law’s central tenets remained unscathed, its power was deeply diminished by these types of changes.

A near perfect example of the type of theory that ultimately resulted from this process can be seen in “Historical Explanation: the Problem of Covering Laws,” by Maurice Mandelbaum. In it, Mandelbaum introduces the idea of “complex events” that take place in specific circumstances as a result of a large number of universal laws that, despite their individual explanatory power, cannot be combined into larger rules governing the functioning of history. “The laws through which we explain a particular event need not be laws which state a uniform sequence concerning complex events of the type which we wish to explain. Rather, they may be

laws which state uniform connections between two types of factors which are contained within those complex events which we propose to explain…The law (or laws) by means of which we explain a particular case is not (or surely need not be) a law which ‘covers’ that case in the sense that the case itself is an instance of what has been stated by the law. Rather, the case is explained by the law because those types of factor with which the law is concerned are present in it. This, of course, appears perfectly reasonable, and yet it removes a great deal of the logical threat that Hempel’s discussion of unsatisfactory/unscientific explanations within history had initially contained. This formulation of the C.L.M specifically does not require the designation of a set of law-governed conditions “necessary” for the occurrence of an event, but rather merely ones that are “sufficient” for the occurrence. This difference negates the demand that any historical explanation be able to suffice as both a predictive/explanatory apparatus, admitting that such explanation should more accurately be considered a causally explicit description, one which definitely outlines the existence of a causal link between the causes and laws being considered without being able to prove it deductively from the basis of this description. Somewhat ironically, such a description would actually closely correspond to Hempel’s original designation of all existing historical explanations as “explanation sketches,” in which general rules are referenced without being organized in a manner so as create an absolutely logically compelling connection. Yet because such a system has now essentially cut itself off from the logical possibility of ever attaining the type of “full”

description called for by Hempel’s theory, the power of the covering-law model to compel the creation of a properly scientific history seems to have escaped.

Quite apart from the work done by those who were, in general principle, friendly to the C.L.M., a significant body of philosophical work was also created by those who directly opposed the Hempelians. Because this group developed their views in response to the more coordinated efforts of the covering-law theorists, the work of the “Anti-Hempelians” assumed a wide variety of theoretical positions, lacking a clearly articulated “manifesto” that could play a unifying role similar to that of “The Function of General Laws.” This heterogeneity was worsened by the fact that many of the positions that writers found it necessary to adopt brought them into increasingly uncharted territory, with the result that there was a great deal of terminological “reinventing of the wheel” in the earlier stages of the anti-Hempelian response. All of this makes it difficult to find an adequate model for describing the varied intellectual currents that made up the field discussion during the period.

Because of this, I have found it useful to describe the work of the “Anti-Hempelians” in terms of the general arguments that they used, rather than (for the most part) through a discussion of the specific positions taken by various individuals in their work. Despite the historical danger inherent in formulating what might be construed as artificial categories, I believe that this approach is justified because it allows me to pull out specific strands of thought as they developed within the debate, a strategy that is necessary because of the widespread difficulties that a number of authors had in articulating cohesive accounts of their theoretical positions.

In the course of the multi-faceted discussion that surrounded the evolution of the philosophy of history from its origins in the C.L.M. of the late 1940’s until the full-blown focus on narrativity that characterized the field by early 1970’s, it was commonplace for individual ideas to be pulled out of the context in which they initially appeared, and be incorporated into the general sweep of the debate. As stated before, each of these categories is more of an ideal-typical strand of logic rather than an independently occurring position. As a result, a work by a single author would often utilize more than one in order to formulate his argument, and all of them share clear interconnections. Despite this, such separation enables a better perception of the gradual emergence of the various strands of thought that would, by the end of the 1960, culminate in a substantive philosophical inquiry capable of standing on its own outside of the confines of the covering law debates.

In many ways, the first and most intellectually independent position critical of the C.L.M. was the product of a group of neo-Collingwoodians whose work was primarily focused on the problems of individual psychology and agency in history, particularly those raised by the attempt to include descriptions of intentioned actions within the covering-law model of explanation. Ultimately, this challenge focused on the arguments that surrounded the discussion of whether it was possible to create a logically coherent explanatory structure based on conjectures made about the motivations of single individuals in relation to the current understanding of the situation in which they functioned. Hempelians in favor of this approach argued these conjectures could be considered to take the form of a falsifiable hypothesis, in which

25 By this I mean that they demonstrated a clear and cohesive identity of their own.
a basic value-orientation could be “sketched” so that it would form a logically verifiable whole in relation to the existing empirical data\textsuperscript{26}. In opposition to this law-derived approach to the explanation of individual historical actions, the Collingwoodian camp’s approach was hermeneutical, positing that research allowed knowledge that could provide increasing levels of empathy with the position of the actor in the past. This knowledge aided the historian in recreating the situation of an individual in his or her own mind, allowing a “reenactment” of the questions or decisions made by an individual historical actor. Because this reenactment essentially recreated the processes of the actor in the past, the historian could develop “objective” knowledge of their subject, producing an “explanation based exclusively on the ascertainment of a fact, that is, what I would have done under certain historical circumstances.”\textsuperscript{27}

The second strand of criticism initially appeared slightly after the criticism put forward by the Neo-Collingwoodians. It was based on the argument that, while the C.L.M. could be used to accurately analyze the individual claims and explanations that were made in historical writing, this in no way invalidated the particularly historical form of knowledge that was generated by the traditional practice of history. This was because the basic descriptive and logical schemata embodied by the C.L.M. was not the same as the one that formed the basis for historical inquiry. This position understood Hempel’s position as being based on an underlying philosophical belief in the existence of a single unified criterion of logical validity that was equally

\textsuperscript{26} This is based on the version of this claim found in Alan Donagan, “Historical Explanation: The Popper-Hempel Theory Reconsidered.” \textit{History and Theory}, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1964), especially pp. 17-23.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, 8.
applicable to all forms of explanation. This “single although complex” explanatory principle “consists in showing that the statement asserting the occurrence of an event or other phenomenon to be explained follows by strict formal deduction (including mathematical deduction) from one or more statements about initial conditions of the system to which the laws apply and in which the phenomenon to be explained occurs.” This was, as many pointed out, a view of explanation drawn from the methodology of the physical sciences, specifically a philosophically idealized model of theoretical physics. Faced with the aggressively positivistic aspects of this theory, those in opposition began to elaborate an alternate conception of knowledge that was fundamentally perspectival, exploring the ways in which different explanatory schemes constructed a body of evidence in mutually exclusive and logically incomparable manners. Just as science constituted an approach (or an example of an approach) towards describing the world, these theorists argued that history also exemplified such an explanatory model, one with a hold on meaning just as valid as the empirical knowledge delivered by physics. According to Louis O. Mink, “each mode [of knowledge] is self-justifying: critical analysis and intellectual advance are possible within but only within each mode. In each case, the aim of ultimate

29 In his article “Explanations in History and the Genetic Sciences,” W.B. Gallie articulates the problematic nature of the unquestioned assumption that the model of scientific explanation represented by physics is universal even with the “hard” sciences through an examination of the alternate (and he argues, more “historical”) form necessarily utilized by the genetic sciences, especially those dealing with evolutionary development of individual species over time. (W. B. Gallie, “Explanations in History and the Genetic Sciences.” Mind, Vol. 64, No. 254 (1955), 160-80)
comprehension leaves open the question of which theories, configurations, or category systems will prove satisfactory by the standards relevant to the aim. Thus while each from its own standpoints envisions a unity of knowledge, and regards the others as errors… one must conclude that they constitute irreducible perspectives.  

Those who employed arguments of this type tended to make two closely related claims: science, with its “atomistic view of the world” and its theoretical/disciplinary focus on formulating general laws out of individual occurrences, had no reason to assume a logical or disciplinary precedence over the variety of thought embodied by history, and that (as a necessary corollary to this) history itself must be able to produce a type of knowledge or understanding of its own. This uniquely “historical knowledge” therefore had to be of a variety that functioned in a manner entirely differently from that being produced by the sciences. The proponents of this position were particularly well situated to deflect the claims made by those supporting the covering-law model because they had no logical need to engage the latter in a full theoretical refutation. Instead they were free to accept that the covering law model could provide an excellent description of how aspects of history functioned, without admitting that it was capable of supplanting the unique

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32 In an interesting note, Mandelbaum makes a side note that this experimentally driven focus, particularly in the way that it tends to ignore the unique in favor of generality, is not necessarily true for the entirety of what can rightfully be considered science. “Natural scientists too might be interested in particular events, such as the formation of a particular geological deposit, or the appearance of a new biological variety in a particular environment.” (Mendelbaum, “Historical explanation, the problem of covering laws,” 230)
form of inquiry that history represented; the two simply formed different (and
irreducible) methods of inquiry. As influentially argued by Arthur Danto, the mode of
analysis and investigation that makes up the functioning of historical thought is “so
different from that of formulating a comprehensive social theory that the former can
scarcely be conceived as preparatory to the latter, or the latter a completion of the
former. It is Hempel’s mistake, I think, to consider history a pre-science, attending to
the moment when it, too, can dazzle us with its proper set of laws. It is as though one
imagined that writing symphonies was the ultimate goal of every composer, and that
string-quartets were ‘sketches’ for symphonies.”

Obviously, an argument that claims for history the right to its own unique brand
of knowledge must be supported by a detailed exposition of the nature of this
knowledge if it is to be accepted a logically conclusive. Therefore, in order to defend
this rejection of the C.L.M., a group of anti-hempelian philosophers of history
attempted to formulate a theoretical paradigm of historical functioning capable of
successfully articulate the modality of this historical knowledge. If such a project
were successful, it would allow history to escape its Hempelian description as
essentially a rough proto-science, and thereby prove history’s incapacity for
subsumption under the C.L.M. by shattering the validity of its central criticism. In
order to do this, the theoretical work produced in this period primarily, if not
exclusively, focused on the various aspects of the use of specifically “historical”
language, and more specifically on the way in which historians employed narrative
structures in order to organize and then relay the information that was produced by

No.1 (1956), 20.
their research. This was widely understood to be the most promising path by which to solve the vexing problem of “historical explanation” that had been raised by the C.L.M., as well as the most obvious area in which to start a detailed explication of the type of knowledge that historical writing did in fact produce.

In addition, this strategy also meshed well with a number of more practical considerations. For one, a critical analysis of the C.L.M. makes it readily apparent that its logical claims are weakest when being applied to historical explanations as they are actually given in historical writing, rather than the arguments considered in an ideal form. For instance, Hempel argues that, “The statement that the Dust Bowl farmers migrate to California ‘because’ continual drought and sandstorms render their existence increasingly precarious, and because California seems to them to offer so much better living conditions. This explanation rests on some such universal hypothesis as that populations will tend to migrate to regions which offer better living conditions.” But while such a general law can be inferred from such a description of the motivations of the Dust Bowl farmers, it does not follow that what a historian is actually doing in such a circumstance explaining their actions in order to support or refute such a general law. This then suggests that the historian is in reality engaged something fundamentally different than supposed by Hempel. Given the nature of historical practice, the most obvious place to look for this alternate grounding would be in relation to the narrative exposition of the past, the aspect of history that make up the most prominent non-scientific part of its basic practice.

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This approach also gained support from the fact that it closely coincided with a number of previously existing descriptions of historical writing, most notably the long-held and ill-defined conception of history as being situated somewhere between an art and a science.\(^{35}\)

While a theoretical consideration of the importance of narrative form on the nature of historical understanding began to appear in the context of the resurgent philosophy of history as early as 1951,\(^{36}\) it was very much a child of its times, entirely formulated as a response to the challenges posed by the C.L.M. As a result, much of this early work shares that model’s basic conceptual framework, focusing almost exclusively on questions of explanation as they were conceived in the context of scientific hypothesis\(^{37}\). This is, of course, merely another way of stating that the earliest attempts to provide a narrative philosophy of history emerged from the tradition of analytical philosophy, a system of description that, as has been previously discussed, tended to utilize logical analysis of particular linguistic claims to the exclusion of almost all else, particularly the sociological or situational elements that might reasonably be taken to make up a significant aspect of historical writing.

Among these early writers, historical narrative was primarily understood as a collection of individual assertive or explanatory statements, arranged in a

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\(^{35}\) Mink, *Historical Understanding*, 44-45.

\(^{36}\) “Mr. W.H. Walsh, in his introduction to the philosophy of history, points out that the historian goes beyond plain narrative and aims at not merely at saying what happened, but also at (in some sense) explaining it,” William Dray. “Explanatory Narrative in History.” *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol 4, No. 14 (1954), 24.

\(^{37}\) “Of course Mink, like Dray and Gallie, devoted himself to attacking the underlying assumption of Hempel’s article, that all claims of knowledge must at least implicitly have the same logical structure, but his arguments for ‘the autonomy of historical understanding’ inevitably were shaped by the position he was attacking.” Richard T. Vann, “Louis Mink’s Linguistic Turn.” *History and Theory*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (1987), 2.
chronological order and linked through both their focus on a single unifying subject, and through a set of causal interrelationships. An influential element in this early discussion was W.H. Walsh’s notion of “plain or significant” varieties of historical narrative, the difference between which is the result of them having either “A) a description of the facts restricted to a straightforward statement of what occurred, [or] B) an account of them which brought out their connections." In “The logic of Historical Narration,” Morton White based his argument on a reformulation of this distinction, renaming the two (respectively) chronicle and history, and stating that while a chronicle is “a conjunction of non-explanatory empirical statements which expressly mention…[a] subject, and which report things that have been true of it at different times,” (with the further explanation that by non-explanatory he means “one that does not connect two statements of fact with a word like because”) because a history “makes reference to explanatory connections, we may conceive of a history as a logical conjunction of explanatory statements.” In this manner, White brought Walsh’s distinction into the actual work of historical writing, arguing that it was the chronicle, and not the history, which should be understood as attempting to describe “precisely what happened” to an object in history. This meant that the definition of history must include explanatory activity beyond merely recounting the causal chains of the past. Despite this, the basic description of historical narrative is, in its unquestioned assumption that the explanation of facts and events form the primary

40 Walsh, “‘Plain’ and ‘Significant’ Narrative in History,” 480.
task of historical writing, clearly the product of a conceptual foundation that shares many of the same basic positivistic beliefs as Hempel. Thus the goal of a history is still understood as explanation—an attempt to provide a solution to a specific question. It was this assumption that would be the focus of William Dray’s vital article “Explanatory Narrative in History,” which appeared in the “Philosophical Quarterly” in 1954. In this article, Dray argues that, by conceptualizing history as a connected chain of causal claims, the covering-law model (and therefore, theorists like White) misrepresented that type of explanation that history is concerned with providing. Dray claims that this difference lies in the fact that scientific explanations are fundamentally concerned with “why something happened,” while historical narratives focus on an explanation of “how something could have happened." Utilizing this description, Dray rejects the C.L.M.’s instance that a full explanation must detail why something necessarily occurred, claiming that merely by elucidating the conditions that enabled an event to occur, its occurrence has been explained. Dray then goes on

41 This brief description is, in many ways, unfair to the breath of White’s thinking on the subject. The rest of the essay deals with the extent to which judgments based on a non-logical determination of value provide much of the background for the descriptive approach to the past that every historian employs, climaxing with the argument that “Many historians, I submit, try to colligate features which they select from among the known features as colligable, on the basis of a value judgment as to their importance. In other words, even if we should be able to characterize the relationship between colligating feature and colligated features [that is, between the central organizing focus of a history, and the individual facts that are collected in the investigation of this feature] as ‘objective,’ even if we should hold that the logical relation between the statement attributing the colligating features and the colligated features is like that of superior scientific statement to its conforming data or the data it explains, the choice of the data to be colligated will often rest on a value judgment that will sometimes be relative to differing standards of importance.” (White, “philosophy and history,” 23.)
to link this type of explanation with history, and more particularly, with historical narrative. In characterizing this link, Dray writes, “When asked for an explanation of a certain event or state of affairs, the historian often responds by telling a story. The claim I wish to make is that the narrative he offers sometimes explains in the ‘how’ rather than the ‘why’ sense.⁴³ Although Dray admits that this type of explanation might then raise the question of ‘why’ a certain event took place, this is not necessary in order for the historian to accurately recount the past in a way that explains the course that it took, allowing events that might appear to be impossible to be accepted by the reader through the introduction of the conditions that enabled the possibility, but not necessity, of their occurrence. “An historical explanation may thus amount to telling the story of what actually happened, and telling it in such a way that various transitions [are acceptable]…. Answers to likely objections are built into the narrative, which may thus have explanatory force…⁴⁴” With this depiction, Dray formulated the first account of the explanatory force of historical narrative that did not describe it as a connection of scientifically causal statements embedded within the structure of a narrative/descriptive form, but allowed it a fundamentally different logic of explanation. In this effort he was not alone; the following years saw the publishing of articles like W.B. Gallie’s “Explanations in history and the Genetic Sciences,” (1955) and Arthur C. Danto’s “On Explanations in History,” (1956) both of which made arguments to similar effect, with Gallie arguing that history shared a similar form of explanation to change-charting tracing of the genetic sciences, and

⁴³ Ibid, pg 24.
⁴⁴ Ibid., pg 27
Danto arguing that historians were fundamentally engaged with “narrative models, or ‘true stories.’”

Although a clear process of elaboration and development can be seen in the state of the discussion of narrative over the next decade, its primary focus consistently remained the refutation of the still dominant C.L.M., with the result that much of this work remained tethered to a basic framework (namely, the constant need to summarize and refute the law, and an accompanying inability to satisfactorily build off the increasingly complex position that had developed) that seems to have made attaining investigative independence difficult if not impossible. It was the tenacity of this linkage that most likely explains the retarded development of a clear delineation of the questions surrounding narrative as a field of inquiry in its own right, making it difficult to formulate the kind of terminological and conceptual unity that is so vital for the efficient exploration of a new area of thought. It was only after the popularity of the covering-law model began to fade in the mid sixties that these issues began to be taken up as an independent issue, as writers such as W.B. Gallie, A.R. Louch, Frederick A. Olafson, and most notably, Louis. O. Mink produced a body of work that set the stage for much of the “linguistic turn.”

Fascinatingly, what made this independence possible was not the result of logical success by the narrativists in their arguments against the Hempelians, but general changes that were occurring in the larger worlds of philosophy and academia. For one, after nearly a decade of debate, the subject had lost much of its intellectual excitement. Even the editors of History and Theory, a recently founded journal

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journal devoted almost entirely to this type of issue, “decided that the argument was exhausted except as a first-year seminar exercise for graduate students.\textsuperscript{46}” In addition, outside of the small world of the philosophy of history, larger theoretical events did much to reduce both the power and intellectual attractiveness of the C.L.M. The most important of these was the massive changes that occurred in the philosophy of science following the 1962 publication of Thomas Kuhn’s \textit{The Structure of Scientific Revolutions}. As a result of this widely read and hugely influential text, “It suddenly became the philosophical fashion to view science historically rather than logically, as an evolving system rather than a timeless calculus, as something whose shifts over time are philosophically more central to its essence than the view of it as timeless edifice of theories, related to laws that in turn were related to observation sentences…\textsuperscript{47}” As a result of these developments, the Hempelian position fell to an assault from what was, as it were, the rear, and quickly came to be viewed as increasingly irrelevant to the functioning of either the philosophy of history or the philosophy of science. Looking at the record, the disappearance of the Covering-Law seems less a retreat than a collapse. Rather than falling to an adversary that functioned within the same basic descriptive field in which it operated, Kuhn’s epochal text rendered the basic terms on which the theory was founded meaningless. “It just stopped being relevant, the way the whole philosophy of history it defined

stopped being. It was replaced with a different set of questions, a world in effect, into which it no longer fit.\(^{48}\)

In the rapid expansion of narrative theory that occurred after the decline of the Hempelians, there were two general approaches towards the question of narrativity. The first and in many ways more traditional of these approaches is epitomized by White and Danto, whose work reflected a significantly closer connection to the larger concerns of analytical philosophy/analytical philosophy of science than can be found among the more “literary” theorists of historical narrativity. Both men published their primary texts on this subject in 1965, and in both cases, they attempted to formulate a middle position, one that would admit the existence of a specifically historical type of knowledge while still justifying it within the basic conceptual mechanisms that had served as the foundations for the Hempelian approach. As a result, the works were more concerned with bridging the gaps that had developed between the various positions in the field than with developing a philosophy of history specifically concerned with the questions of narrative.

“Danto [did] much to narrow the gap between the two as much as possible, by pointing out that we always explain events under a certain description of them and that one of the historian’s most fascinating tasks is therefore to describe the past in such a way that we can feed those descriptions into the machinery of the covering-laws that we have at our disposal.\(^{49}\) Unsurprisingly given the impeccable philosophical credentials of both White and Danto, both of these works still retain

\(^{48}\) ibid, 182.
much of their logical persuasiveness. Yet despite this, the approach that they took to the consideration of history did not seem to match the theoretical currents of its time\textsuperscript{50}, and their works did influence later developments to as great an extent as some of the other figures working in the field at the same time.

A significant alternative to this approach can be seen in the work of Gallie, Louch, and Mink. This group primarily relied on a method of analysis that was based on the argument that, to use Gallie’s words, most philosophies of history “persistently confuse delineations and analyses of historical understanding with the problem of its vindication, the problem of how historical theses should be tested, and of how the subjective bias of particular writers should be overcome.”\textsuperscript{51} By focusing their efforts on the examination of this first category, these writers produced a body of theory that increasingly concerned itself with questions surrounding the implications of the literary and narrative structures of historical accounts. Particularly important in this regard was a shift in the emphasis from historical explanation to historical understanding or comprehension. Closely related to the “perspectivist” conceptions of knowledge supported by Danto and Mink, this approach focused on the actual ways in which the information contained by historical writing is transmitted to its readers, an investigation that served to highlight the importance of narrative form as the carrier of this information. A particularly telling argument in this regard was made by Mink when he pointed out that, unlike empirical scientists who rely on their ability to utilize the results of fellow-researchers without replicating their experiments or even

\textsuperscript{50} Given the fate of the covering law model, Danto’s efforts to resuscitate it did little to make the case for his continued relevance.

\textsuperscript{51} Gallie, “The Historical Understanding,” 149.
needing to follow the processes by which the knowledge embedded in the conclusion was produced, the conclusions reached by historical research do no such thing; they are fundamentally “non-detachable,” requiring the reader to follow the entirety of an account in order to fully grasp its historical “argument.” “The significant conclusions, one might say, are ingredient in the argument itself, not merely in the sense that they are scattered throughout the text but in the sense that they are represented by the narrative order itself. As ingredient conclusions they are exhibited rather then demonstrated. While the concept of historical narratives containing irreducible ingredient conclusions can be understood as being logically derived from Dray’s arguments about the specific type of explanation that is fulfilled by historical writing, the manner in which Mink formulated this claim specifically positions historical narratives as the fundamental carrier of historical information by means of their nature as narratives.

The importance of the conceptual shift represented by this last point cannot be overstated. Unlike previous theorists of historical narrative like Morton White, who basically considered narratives to consist of a large-scale configuration of individual causal or factual statements, this approach began to consider narratives as exhibiting structural properties that existed at the level of the historical account as a whole. This effort required an analysis of historical writing that operated at increasingly large scales, abandoning the theoretical dissection of individual claims or minute chronicles that had provided the basic theatre of activity for earlier philosophers of history. This movement towards an analysis of the functioning of

52 Mink, Historical Understanding, 79.
historical works as a whole proved to be a vital influence on the development of a linguistically oriented historiography, for the first time formulating a description of historical writing that made it possible for individuals to cross disciplinary lines, utilizing the increasingly well-developed theoretical resources of semiotics, literary theory, and anthropology in order to redevelop the basic problematic of the philosophy of history. In his account of this period, Richard T. Vann described this change as crucial, stating, “Once history is seen as literature, questions of genre, plotting and the fundamental organizing principles of historiography come to the fore. These had been systematically repressed in the so-called analytical philosophy of history, which like all analysis tended to decompose historical discourse into its smallest intelligible units, like the two sentence narrative. But analysis—especially analysis of language and narrative—evoked, dialectically, a recurrence of ‘speculative’ or substantive philosophy of history.”

As narratives began to be analyzed as wholes in this manner, elements of linguistic structure that had previously been overlooked began to come to the fore. This trend is present as early as Gallie’s “The Historical Understanding,” which was published in 1963, and only grew more pronounced as the decade went on. Not yet utilizing the type of complex structural analysis that would later become the keystone of the linguistic turn, Gallie began to consider the narrative logic of historical writing through his identification of its basic mechanics with those of a story. While this inherently obvious comparison had appeared before, few had previously gone below its surface, attempting to fully articulate the implications of this connection. Gallie

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posited that “The sense of “following” -- following to a conclusion -- that applies to stories is of an altogether different kind from the sense of following an argument so that we can see that its conclusion follows.” Gallie argued that the primary criterion of the conclusion to a properly structured story is the acceptability of the final situation that it depicts in its relation to rest of the story. This point of view is therefore fundamentally retrospective, introducing a new element of non-chronological structuring. Considered from the perspective of its conclusion, a story is able to accept an almost unlimited number of events that were, from the perspective of a first-time reader, utterly unexpected, as long as these events eventually prove to be logically coherent within the narrative structure of the account as a whole. This logic therefore completely reorients the connections of causality as they exist within a scientific explanation. “We should notice here that perhaps of greater importance for stories than the predictability relation between events is the converse relation which enables us to see, not indeed that some earlier event necessitated a later one, but that a later event required, as its necessary condition, some earlier one.” Applied to the construction of a historical narrative, the full implications of this insight form the undeniable basis of the linguistic turn. They recognize, for the first time, that there exists in historical writing a level of achronic relationships that lie beneath the basic surface of the text, structural elements that, without necessarily adhering directly in the past itself, are inextricably linked to the basic process of the creation of a descriptive narrative of these events.

54 Gallie, “The Historical Understanding,” 152.
55 Ibid, p.153
In making this shift, Gallie's argument can also be seen as the first stage in the identification of the epistemological issues that would, in the course of the "linguistic turn," assume an increasingly central place in the philosophy of history. At its most basic level, this problem consists of justifying the belief in the ability of historical writing to transmit valid knowledge about the past, given the fact that this knowledge is both contained in and created by the relationships that exist among its constituent data, relationships that are at least partially dependent on the narrative logics of the story. Perhaps because he had not explored the full ramifications of his introduction of literary elements into the structure of historical writing, Gallie himself found the solution to this issue fairly easily. Identifying the primary modality of the relationship between the reader and the narrative to be that of following, his account of narratives stresses their ability to render contingent events followable, and therefore meaningful, in the eyes of the reader. The historian then merely organizes what already exists, the story that he narrates reflects the actual inherent structure of the area of history to which it refers. Gallie describes this inherent structure as a trend within the data of the past. "A trend or tendency is something that we see gradually disclosed through a succession of events; it is something that belongs to the events which we are following and no others; it is, so to speak, a pattern-quality of those

56 Describing narrative in this way also allowed Gallie to extent a peace branch to the partisans of the CLM by admitting that their general laws could be used to formulate a description capable of providing a more nuanced understanding to the reader. "Applying generalities so as to be able to follow a developing performance or game or story or history is thus basically different from applying them with a view to deducing, and in particular predicting, some future event...but in history, much as in science, explanations have a positive role: not only do they allow the historian to classify, and clarify and endorse facts which at first seem puzzling or improbable, they help him to enlarge his vision of the context and potential relevance of particular actions and episodes." (Ibid, 184.)
particular events. It would thus seem that our appreciation of any historical trend must depend upon, or be a resultant of, our following a particular narrative, a narrative of events which happen to be arranged in such a way that, roughly speaking, they move in some easily described relation to some fixed point of reference.  

This style of narrative theorizing was, in many ways, brought to its logical conclusion in the work of Louis O. Mink. While a significant contributor to the debate surrounding narrative theory throughout the sixties, Mink’s most significant contributions came during the end of the decade and continued through the first half of the seventies. Building from Gallie’s model, in “History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension,” Mink heavily criticized the idea that the act of following was the basic mode of interaction with an historical account, convincingly arguing that no reader of history is actually ignorant of the eventual conclusion of the account by point out they must have some idea of how it turned out merely through their understanding of their position in the present. Having rejected this description, Mink goes on to argue that “The difference between following a story and having followed a story is more than the incidental difference between present experience and past experience…in the case of human actions and changes, to know an event by retrospection is categorically, not incidentally, different from knowing it by prediction or anticipation.” Narratives, by bringing together a number of individual pieces of information in a structure that is comprehensible as a whole, serves as means by which humans can obtain a sense of understanding of the past. This understanding, Mink argues, is not the result of the ability to logically trace an

57 ibid, 172.
outcome through a connected series of causal chains, but rather of “grasping together in a single mental act things which are not experienced together, or even capable of being so experienced, because they are separated by time, space, or logical kind.\textsuperscript{59}” The basic outlines of a historical narrative are always already known—even if a new account may drastically change the nature of the understanding that the reader had previously held, it is still understood as another piece in an even larger whole, the totality making up the basic understanding of past as it relates to the present. Mink’s vital insight is that despite the fact that a narrative account functions diachronically, moving through time event by event, the understanding of the past is, at least in certain aspects, fundamentally synchronic. The narrative structuring of the story allows it to attain the kind of unity that this understanding requires, and it is the goal of historical writing to formulate such a cohesive whole out of the disparate contingencies that exist as evidence. “In the configurational comprehension of a story which one has followed, the end is connected with the promise of the beginning, as well as the beginning with the promise of the end, and the necessity of the backward references cancels out, so to speak, the contingency of the forward references. To comprehend temporal succession means to think of it in both directions at once, and then time is no longer the river which bears us along but the river in aerial view, upstream and downstream seen in a single survey.\textsuperscript{60}”

This type of description was, without the theoretical tools derived from a more methodical study of the structure of the literary elements, essentially as far as the narrative theory that existed before the linguistic turn could push its analysis. Without

\textsuperscript{59} ibid, 49.  
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, 57.
this, all that was left was the realization of the radical destabilization that these theoretical developments had unwittingly introduced into the theoretical discourse. By explicitly questioning the extent to which the ability of historical accounts to explain the events of the past is a result of the manner in which they are structured at a linguistic and literary level, the narrativists had in a large part resurrected the long-vanished specter of historical relativism. However, where that earlier period of doubt had primarily been focused on the impossibility of a purely objective relationship to the past, the epistemological challenge unveiled by Mink was based on far more rigorously considered problems, most importantly those concerning the possible sufficiency of the connection between the historical text and the past “itself.” Mink described this problem as a result of “an incompatibility between our implicit presupposition of what historical narratives are about, and our conscious belief that the formal structure of a narrative is constructed rather than discovered,” and it was a logical problem whose solution he could not find. Indeed, it was this very insight that would form the fulcrum of the radical textuality of the linguistic turn, a development that was for the most part a development of a group of scholars (most notably Hayden White) who had begun to make serious inroads into the philosophy of history during the period in which Mink was codifying his understanding of the full extent of this problem.

Although the theories produced in the context of the linguistic turn would provide much of the content for the philosophy of history during the next three decades, it is vital to note the immense influence exerted on the structure of the field by the

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61 Ibid, 201.
Hempelian, Analytic, and Narrativist philosophers of history of 1950’s and 1960’s. By creating a significant and self-sustaining discourse, complete with a disciplinary structure that allowed it to function independently of its neighbors, this uniquely Anglo-American tradition *created* the philosophy of history as clearly defined field of inquiry in a manner unlike anywhere else. This is not to say that France, for instance, did not have philosophers who thought about history and wrote about history. But French academic life did not have a philosophy of history, and this type of difference in intellectual categorization will always have an enormous effect on the structure of an inquiry. In order to understand the functioning of a discourse, it is vital to understand the configuration of its field. In order to understand the configuration of a field, it is necessary to trace the conditions under which this field developed. The process of development, created by both the intellectual achievements and discursive structuring of the Anglo-American philosophy of history, created the conditions that enabled many of the most explosive developments of the linguistic turn.
Chapter Two- The Rhetorical Moment of Hayden White

One of the defining features of the philosophy of history as it moved through the seventies and eighties was the extraordinary increase that could be seen in the diversity and reach of its basic discursive constitution. Expanding far beyond the tightly focused and theoretically consistent debates that had initially characterized the field during the 1950’s and 60’s, the “new” historiographic theory of the seventies actively participated in the growing academic trend towards an increasingly interdisciplinary model of inquiry that came to be the hallmark of the various bodies of literary and (post-)structuralist theory then in the process of attaining their present day position within the academy. As always when discussing academic developments, a clear indication of these processes can be seen in changes such as the shift of journals in which the debate was played out. While History and Theory continued to remain central to the discussion, publications such as Diacritics, New Literary Theory, and in particular Clio began to play an increasingly important role in presenting the cutting edge of historiographic writing, almost entirely replacing the philosophical journals that had previously served a similar function. Changes such as these, of which it would be possible to give any number of other examples, indicate the beginning of a pronounced shift in the paradigmatic formation of the philosophy of history, one that would come to alter the framework of conceptual and disciplinary connections by which the goals, intellectual style, and academic position that structured the field were constituted.
Within this process, the work of Hayden White played an absolutely vital role, becoming a significant influence on a number of developments that helped initiate these changes. In the body of work that he produced during the seventies, developments within the philosophy of history reached a point of inflection, one marking a clear transition in the type of the problems that made up its primary concerns, as well as the mode of analysis used to consider them. As a result of (and in the context of) these changes, the position held by the philosophy of history in the disciplinary structures of the Anglo-American academy underwent a significant reorientation, altering the discursive fields to which it was understood to be linked and, as a result, significantly expanding its importance in relation to both the historical profession and the humanities in general. It is important to consider these changes as a complex of events in which a number of factors, reflecting both the work of individuals as well as larger intellectual and cultural trends, all functioned and developed in close conjunction, with the result being that one cannot claim absolute causal precedent for any individual factor. Although it is crucial not to downplay the influence of this general context, it is also important to realize the extent to which preexisting trends are capable of being vitalized by the application of a significant historical force, without which they most likely would not have taken on the form in which they came to prominence. This was precisely the effect of Hayden White’s writing, and if any consideration of the impact of his work must admit that it was well situated to gain support from its context, it must also be said that it brilliantly positioned itself within this context, and that its ability to do so is an indication of its originality, rhetorical forcefulness, and theoretical cohesion. Although the claims for
its revolutionary importance within the historical discipline have often been somewhat overstated among the (still) relatively insular community that can be counted as both active historians and consumers of the philosophy of history, it is absolutely correct (as can be seen in any set of recollections by current philosophers of history) to describe White’s work as the single most important Anglo-American influence on the evolution of the linguistic or post-modern conception of history, along with the critical historiographic theory that goes along with it.

**Theoretical Interlude**

Before entering into a more detailed discussion of the writings of Hayden White, it is necessary to elaborate some of the considerations that provide the justification for the analytical style that has been adopted in this thesis, as well as for the ultimate purpose to which this analysis will be put. My discussion of the “Philosophy of History” (or “Metahistorical Theory” or “Historiographic theory,” etc.) is focused on two closely related goals. I am attempting to describe the evolution of the field by tracking the ways in which the theoretical positions held by those engaged in the discussion changed over time, while simultaneously dealing with the products created by this constant progression as independent objects in their own right, complex texts with logical structures fully capable of making compelling

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63 This can be seen clearly in “Encounters: The Philosophy of History after Postmodernism,” a collection of interviews with notable philosophers of history, in which almost every single author acknowledges White as a major influence on both their work and the field in general.” Ewa Domanska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998.
suggestions about the very processes (i.e. historical reality) in which my account attempts to situate them. My analysis pulls in both directions, and this tension is perhaps inherent in my intention to produce both an historical account of the philosophy of history, as well as piece of theory that is in good measure built on the legacy of this philosophy. Ultimately, my attempt to produce an historical account with this double focus is predicated on my belief that such a focus is necessary in order to accurately deal with either, and that ignoring either element in an analysis of the area under discussion would be to invite, if not necessitate, systematic distortions in any attempt to garner a useful understanding.

For the most part, the descriptive system that I will use is based on a generalized acceptance of the concept of cultural/linguistic discourse as it currently exists within the academy. Because this understanding has been developed as a response to the work of a number of thinkers, I will briefly describe its basic ideas without necessarily recounting the lengthy genealogy from which it emerged. Essentially, this approach to the description of human meaning-activity\textsuperscript{64} argues that such activity necessarily takes place within a general linguistic/semiotic framework that determines what can and cannot be said meaningfully. To put it another way, this activity determines the basic rules that govern how and in what way a statement can have meaning. In many ways, the basic makeup of such a discursive field can also be considered to represent a “logic” or grammar of a specific type. These systems develop according to the pressures of the specific historical conditions in which they

\textsuperscript{64} A definition that can quite easily be expanded to include all human activity. Luckily, because this thesis is dealing with a body academic writing which most definitely fits even the most stringent definition of a meaning-producing activity, it is possible to avoid the messy problems provoked by this expansion.
function, and they are able to change as the individuals who function within them shift and push at their boundaries in an effort to better describe and/or control the changing world in which they live.

Furthermore, these meaning systems do not function in isolation. Rather, they are connected to each other in complex configurations, the exact dynamics between which are dependent on the unique manner by which the system(s) originally developed. To quote J.G.A Pocock, who offers a magnificent description of this conceptualization:

A complex plural society will speak a complex plural language; or rather, a plurality of specialized languages, each carryings its own biases as to the definition and distribution of authority, will be seen converging to form a highly complex language, in which many paradigmatic structures exist simultaneously, debate goes on as between them, individual terms and concepts migrate from one structure to another, altering some of their implications and retaining others, and the processes of change within language considered as a social instrument can be imagined as beginning. Add to all this the presence of a variety of specialized intellectuals, making second order statements of many different kinds in explanation of the languages or languages they find to be in use, and we shall have some image of the richness of texture to be discovered…

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What this description does not quite manage to provide (perhaps because of its focus on a specifically political language) is a proper description of the complexities of the interrelation between various discursive communities. It can help to imagine each such structure as a complex system of ever-changing connections. While following its own internal dynamics, these structures are also constantly being affected by their connections to the surrounding world. These connections can take forms both personal (through the multifaceted socio-linguistic identities of the individuals whose existence makes up the discursive community being described) and cultural (through the stated or unstated connections that such a system necessarily has to its surroundings by dint of its position of knowledge/power/tradition in relation to the wider sphere in which it functions). Each of these small-scale systems takes its place within a larger system\(^{66}\) that then orients itself within or amidst still larger systems. An excellent example of the “nesting” quality of these systems can be seen in the intellectual system of academic history as practiced at American universities. The practitioners of this discipline are university educated professionals (which carries a set of cultural connotations and orientations, and is a cultural system/discursive community of its own) while still remaining individuals that can be part of other systems (for instance, communist-party members or volleyball enthusiasts). The discipline is also part of a broader system of the social sciences/humanities, and a still broader system that is the American university system (although it is important to note that in this example, the modality of the relationship existent at one level, for instance the relationships between history and the humanities, is not necessarily

\(^{66}\)Although in a manner that still allows it to maintain or develop connections, based on the unique path of its historical development, with any number of other systems.
replicated at the level of the relationship between the humanities and the university system).

In addition to the specific uses of language created by specialized discursive communities, a final variety of complexity is created by the fact that the great majority of these communities function by means of the use of the standard, non-technical vocabulary of every-day speech. As a result of this, the specific vocabulary of communities must also be considered as it exists within a civilization considered at the highest level, in which various types of symbolic activities and concepts, tapping into various aspects of the national or cultural past, are also able to exert significant force on linguistic functioning. Within such an open system, it is entirely common for words or concepts to change in meaning or implication within the common cultural parlance, therefore creating a secondary level of linguistic complexity that operates behind the supposedly univocal functioning of a single plane of discourse. This type of associative connection can operate at both the level of individual words, as well as more complex concepts. Describing these conceptual linkages, Louis Mink wrote that “Our experience, thought, and discourse incorporate and reveal to analysis complex conceptual systems which function as a priori, even though, unlike Kant’s categories, they may change over time and thus sustain different styles of rationality...Philosophical problems occur when we believe that the two concepts ought to be linked through a third but can’t say how; or when it is discovered that a concept is linked both to another and to a third which excludes the second; or when two concepts which seemed to be directly linked are confronted with an item of experience which instances one but not the other, or in general when we try to pass
from one conceptual area to another (consider “psycho-somatic” medicine) and find the bridges down, or defended, or just unmapped.” 67 These types of more complex conceptual linkages, functioning in much the same way as those associated more directly to a single word, only add to the intricacy of the connections contained by the historical field.

All of this discussion is, however, only a broad outlining of the types of relationships that can be understood to exist within the historical field as it is conceptualized using this descriptive framework. The difficult aspect of utilizing this method is, of course, attempting to fit the rather abstract vocabulary that it provides to the actual historical patterns under consideration, a task made more difficult by the subtly with which some connections are made, and the complexities inherent in any system comprised of so many independently active and vitally interconnected components. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this attempt at capturing the modalities of this systemic change is once again provided by the double focus that was touched on earlier. The various meaning-systems, constructed with a general rhetorical-logical paradigm, are constantly engaged in the production of their own specialized knowledge, one that is based on the development, continued to the full possible extent, of the options made available by the basic configuration of the field. Because the boundaries that form this configuration are necessary to ensure a shared vocabulary and therefore a shared ability to solve technical problems, as a general rule this discursive foundation functions as a set of presuppositions that is not actively questioned or considered by those within the field. At the same time the field is being

67 Louis O. Mink, Historical Understanding, 124.
developed according to the boundaries provided by this set of extra-logical precepts⁶⁸, its basic nature is also being changed through the transformations undergone in relation to other knowledge fields. While the effect of these changing relationship differs based on the situation at hand⁶⁹, such change will always make a significant impact of some sort, and can in fact quite easily be responsible for the complete transformation of the logic structures of a given field. In addition, a field is of course also fully capable of being revolutionized from the inside⁷⁰.

Prior to this point, my description of the development of the Philosophy of History has been confined to what could be considered a single discursive field, one in which the basic logical structure remains fairly unified because of the relatively homogeneous style/position of those engaged in the debate. Although the process by which the Kuhn-influenced historicization of scientific thought undercut the viability of the Hempelian covering-law model can be considered an example of a significant change within the field, this primarily resulted from the effect of the alteration made to the relationship between the philosophy of history and the philosophy of science. The series of discursive developments that lead to this change were therefore

⁶⁸ In this case, they are extra-logical with respect to the functioning of the field. Because they serve as the preconditions for the possibility of functioning within the field, the field’s logical structure does not (at least usually) apply to them. This is essentially Hume’s basic statement concerning the impossibility of formulating a conceptual system that does not have at least one presupposition that cannot be accounted for from within the system.

⁶⁹ For instance, the force of tradition is such that it can maintain a specific developmental logic in relative isolation for a significant length of time. The perfect example of this would the long life of scholastic catholic theology, which continued functioning far after the conditions in which it developed had ceased.

⁷⁰ In this case, the most obvious example is the concept of Kuhn’s paradigm shift, in which a sudden reorientation of a field is necessary due to sudden amassment of problematic factors within its purview, and the collapse of a previously solid discursive foundation.
primarily centered on the margins of the developments that this essay has been tracking, and a full discussion of the mechanisms by which it occurred has been elided in the interests of a more streamlined discussion. These changes had little impact on the discursive identity of the philosophy of history itself, and therefore did not make it necessary to change the basic description of this historical field that I have provided. Despite the sudden disappearance of the Hempelian menace, the philosophy of history primarily continued on as it had before, safely functioning within a fairly stable set of discursive logic-structures. The work of Hayden White, however, represented a distinct challenge to this relatively well-disciplined rhetorical existence, eventually forcing a fundamental realignment of the discipline as a whole. Therefore, any attempt to describe the full ramifications of his work must necessarily engage in a description that must take into account these epistemic transformations, requiring a more active consideration of the play of discursive meaning and position.

**The Theory of the Seventies**

Although Hayden White was a contributor to the philosophy of history during the sixties, his primary impact as a theoretician is based on the arguments that were first mapped out in “Metahistory,” published in 1973, and thereafter further elaborated and restated in the group of articles collected in the book “Tropics of Discourse,” published in 1978. In these works, White burst into the philosophy of history in a manner unlike anyone since first Hempel published his article on the “General Laws”. Unlike the scholars who had dominated the philosophy of history since that initial furor, the majority of whom had developed their positions gradually
and (with the possible exception of Danto) fairly unsystematically, White’s contribution was presented and received from the first as the sudden flowering of a mature and coherent philosophy. This impression was aided by the fact that Metahistory is a dense and lengthy work, the central argument of which is nothing less than an unified field-theory claiming to elucidate the previously misunderstood character of all historical writing, an argument supported by application of a broad range of theoretical resources taken from disciplines outside of the standard purview of the Anglo-American philosophers of history.

Read today, “Metahistory” still feels like an extraordinarily bold statement, controversial to the point of aggression. Although ostensibly focused on an analysis of the “Historical imagination in nineteenth century Europe,” the work carries a theoretical payload that seems to provide the central motivation for its production. “One of my principal aims, over and above that of identifying and interpreting the main forms of historical consciousness in nineteenth-century Europe, has been to establish the uniquely poetic elements in historiography and philosophy of history in whatever age they were practiced…through the disclosure of the linguistic grounds on which a given idea of history was constituted, I have attempted to establish the ineluctably poetic nature of the historical work and to specify the prefigurative element in a historical account by which its theoretical concepts were tacitly sanctioned.”71 White used the theoretical advantage provided by his grounding in literary theory like a tactical weapon, approaching the central issues of the field by means of a terminologically laden style that had the effecting of making much of the

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previous discussion appear both outdated and misguided, unable to effectively respond to the style in which his arguments were presented. In many ways its appearance was, as articulated by Hans Kellner, “a political event, and its writing…a political act. 72” Far from being merely an apt characterization of the intensity of the debate that White’s work generated among those with a stake in the field, Kellner’s statement suggests an excellent viewpoint from which to begin a serious consideration of the nature of White’s general project.

As has been argued by any number of theorists of language and discourse (including, at a later date, White himself73), it is important to consider the ways in which the structure of the relationships within a discursive field are effected by the multivalent power-relations that exist between the various forces at play within the system, struggles that ultimately center around conflicting definitions of the nature and position of essential terms and boundaries within the discourse. By employing an analysis that highlights the political implications of White’s work as it functioned within the philosophy of history,74 it becomes possible to better capture the means by which his discourse was capable of exerting such a significant effect on this field of thought. Within such a theoretical field, logical thought is always logical thought of a certain kind; it is the type of logic that has been established within the discourse, and that currently governs its operation. The focus on a single type of logic is, however,

74 A term that is here being used to designate both the theoretical content of the text as well as its presentation style.
only possible by the devaluation of other types of logical languages, languages which, because of their connection to individual and conceptual elements that constitute the discursive field, still function and exert influences within the functioning of this field. As was described by Pocock’s schemata, an analysis of the political functioning of a discursive area must be able to take into account this multiplicity of languages, tracking the ways in which positions and power-relations are established by means of reference to these different sources of logic and authority.

According to White, rhetoric is the study of the shift between discursive codes that occurs within speech, and that act by which this switch can be accomplished is that of troping. Troping represents “swerves in locution sanctioned neither by custom nor logic…[a trope] is not only a deviation from one possible, proper meaning, but also a deviation towards another meaning, conception, or ideal of what is right and proper and true ‘in reality.’” Thus considered, tropics is both a movement from one notion of the ways things are related to another notion, and a connection between things so that they can be expressed in a language that takes account of the possibility of their being expressed otherwise.”75 This understanding of discourse then, stresses the fundamental situatedness of any logical system, or --to push the point even further-- of any truth. This does not deny that a “truth”, a truly existing truth standing firmly without any subjective scare-quotes, can exist, but that it must always be justified in relation to the situation in which it has come into existence, and that its status as a truth is always, must always, be up for debate in reference to changing

conditions. Applied to a strategy of historical description, this idea requires a careful consideration of the position that White’s work was able to establish within the philosophy of history, and the power-relationship with the rest of the field that followed from this, a consideration that must focus on how the language that he used to establish these relationships reworked the discursive field in which they were put into operation. This then requires a close examination of the style in which, and to a certain extent, by which he accomplished these conceptual and linguistic shifts, focusing on how the structuring and presentation of his texts and arguments were crucial aspects of his project, inextricable from the meaning for which they were ostensibly the carriers.

This effort is made more complicated by the fact that White’s work is not only politically and rhetorically astute in terms of its own functioning within the discursive field, but that it also takes as its primary subject the importance of precisely this kind of rhetorical movement within the linguistic structure of the historical field. The difficulties involved in disentangling these two conceptually related but logically and functionally separate levels within the work make it necessary to seriously reflect on the proper means by which one should attempt its historical description, and raise a number of more general questions surrounding the historical description of the self-consciously “intellectual” works overall. In an effort to deal with these issues, I plan

76 In an interview in 1993, White discussed the relationship between rhetoric and truth (and therefore discourse and truth) in particularly illuminating language. “Since Plato, the philosophers claimed that rhetoric is suspect, duplicitous, artificial, and that logic is natural. That is ridiculous! Plato was prejudiced against the Sophists because he was an idealist who believed in absolute truths. And rhetoric is based on a genuinely materialist conception of life; it is skeptical... The rhetorician knows that meaning is always being produced; that truth is produced, not found.” (Domanska, *Encounters*, 20)
to engage White’s work through a number of different approaches. At one level, I will attempt a description in the style of what might be termed a traditional “philosophical” or “intellectual” history, in which I will discuss White’s work in terms of its “stated” content, considering these theoretical propositions in terms of the logical frame in which they ostensibly situate themselves. In addition to this, I will also engage in a more critical reading of White’s work, approaching the texts from an angle deliberately designed to cut against what I interpret as his consciously utilized rhetorical effects, unpacking the often veiled concerns that, once consciously apprehended, provide a subtext capable of explaining the conceptual structure that underlies the official logic of White’s stated position. I believe that this underlying structure, rather than the more obvious arguments that function primarily on the surface of the text, is responsible for providing the essential rhetorical force that “Metahistory” was able to generate. Moreover, because of its importance in shaping how White’s theory functioned within this discourse, and the position it was able to assume, it is vital to understand this underlying conceptual structure in order to accurately describe the full range of effects that White’s work would come to have on the philosophy of history.

Although the basic postulates of White’s theory are now widely known, the specificity of the views that he espoused during the period of the seventies in which he published “Metahistory” and “Tropics of Discourse”, combined with the extent to which these views have been subject to a number of changes since, makes it

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77 These changes primarily took the form of a loosening of their originally concrete structure, so that much of the structuralist feel of the original theory has by now been lost. Perhaps the most obvious example of this change was the move away from
necessary to recount the state of his theoretical views as they were expressed in his primary theoretical texts of the period. These texts consisted of the (essentially stand-alone) essay “The poetics of history” that opens “Metahistory,” as well as the articles “Interpretation in History” (1972-1973), “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” (1973), or “Historicism, History, and The Figurative Imagination” (1975), all of which were later published (along with a number of others) in “The Tropics of Discourse” (1978).

White’s approach to the theoretical description of historical writing is best understood as consisting of several interconnected levels of argument, with a number of more complex levels building from claims established by the preceding ones. The foundation of this system is the argument, drawn from the “Narrativist” philosophy of history discussed in the previous chapter, that the proper way in which to consider a historical work is as a “verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or an icon, of past structures and processes in the interests of explaining what they were by representing them.” According to White, this verbal structure can be separated into several different components. At the core of an historical account exists its basic chronicle, which organizes the events of the unprocessed historical field by placing them into simple chronological order. However, this pure chronicle has no meaning in and of itself, because the unaccented recounting of information has none of the structure required for providing such a

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Tropes and towards a (deeply similar) focus on narrative that White made during the 80’s. (Domanska, *Encounters*, 56)

78 Because of the extensive support theoretical that many of these more complex levels required to function, few of them ever entered the general theoretical discourse beyond their inclusion in White’s work.

meaning. Instead, this meaning is given to the events being described by the historian’s decision to “emplot” them within a verbal structure that refers them to an archetypal story form already existent in the general cultural context in which the historian is working. “Considered as potential elements of a story, historical events are value-neutral. Whether they find their place finally in a story that is tragic, comic, romantic, or ironic…depends on the historian’s decision to configure them according to the imperatives of one plot structure or mythos rather than another.”

In order for an emplotment to generate meaning, historians must employ figurative and descriptive language so as to refer the reader to these extra-textual plot structures, providing clues over the course of the account that gradually reveal which of these structures it should be tied to. According to White, the sense of understanding and meaning that a historical account is able to create in its reader is a result of its ability to provide this recognition, which occurs as the reader uncovers the meaning implicit “behind” the otherwise contiguous and meaningless events that form the subject matter of the history. “When he has perceived the class or type to which the story he is reading belongs, he experiences the effect of having the events in the story explained to him. He has at this point not only successfully followed the story; he has grasped the point of it, “understood it as well.”

While this argument still hews closely to the position held by the pre-existing Narrativist theories of history, White differs from this earlier body of work by his clear differentiation of “story” and “plot.” Narrativists like Mink were primarily

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81 White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 86.
concerned with the already known “plot” of an account, the pre-followed sequence of events that make the basic aspects of the history being narrated “already known,” and thus able to be grasped-together and considered as a unified whole. Differing from this approach, which ties the functioning of the synchronic elements in an historical work to the readers’ familiarity with the period being described, White uses the concept of “story” to designate meaning-structures that stand over and above the events of any individual plot. These story-forms are archetypes, “general notions of form that significant human situations must take,” and they designate the variety of meaningful narratives possible in a given culture. In this, White refers to a significant tradition of literary theory that links the narrative possibilities of meaning in a given situation to the way in which the nature of reality is understood in the historical/cultural context, a nature of reality that can be seen clearly through the representational strategies employed in the period. The historical narrative is organized both at the level of plot and of figurative language so that it points the reader to the story-type which it intends to elicit, cluing the reader in by means of linguistic tips that function alongside the “facts” that make up the account. “Properly understood, histories ought never to be read as unambiguous signs of the events they report, but rather as symbolic structures, extended metaphors, that ‘liken’ the events reported in them to some form with which we have already become familiar in our

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82 Ibid.
83 White references Northrop Frye and Auerbach as two particularly notable influences on this aspect of his thought. Auerbach is particularly important for this point; his “Mimesis” is hugely important for White’s conceptualization of the full existential impact of representational strategy, as well as for providing an approach to textual work capable of exploring these strategies successfully.
84 That is, in the ways in which various elements of the plot are “tagged” to indicate their status as beginning, middle, end, denouement, climax, etc.
literary culture… It functions as a symbol, rather than as a sign: which is to say that it
does not give us either a description or an icon of the thing it represents, but tells us
what images to look for in our culturally encoded experience in order to determine
how we should feel about the thing represented.\textsuperscript{85}

In a notable corollary, White also strongly emphasizes the extent to which the
requirement of formulating a cohesive narrative forces the historian to actively shape
the facts in order to have them correspond to such a story archetype. “The events are
made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the
highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetitions, variation of tone and
point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like…\textsuperscript{86}” White rejects the
possibility that any set of historical events could have an implicit meaning, because of
the fact that any given historical event could have a different emplotment in relation
to the part that it could play in an infinite number of possible historical accounts.\textsuperscript{87} He
concludes that the only reason that an historical event can be said to have a meaning
is as a result of its inclusion in the specific set of events that forms an historical
narrative, and that this meaning is therefore entirely the result of the emplotment.
This argument was supported by his (Barthes influenced) close readings of historical
texts, in which he picked apart the individual statements made in the course of a
historical narrative, examining them one by one in order to reveal the extent to which
they included stylistic and referential content whose inclusion was not justifiable in

\textsuperscript{85} White, \textit{Tropics of Discourse}, 91.
\textsuperscript{86} White, \textit{Tropics of Discourse}, 84.
\textsuperscript{87} “The same event can serve as a different kind of element of many historical stories,
depending on the role it is assigned in a specific motific characterization of the set to
which it belongs.” White, \textit{Metahistory}, 7.
terms of a strictly logical explanation, and was therefore only explainable by reference to the story-archetype to which the author had connected his account by means of its emplotment.  

In addition to the discussion of chronicle, plot, and story as elements within historical writing, the other basic element of White’s theoretical work is his conception of the philosophy of history. As was briefly mentioned in the preceding chapter, the theoretical style of the Anglo-American philosophy of history that existed between the 1940s and 1970s was, at least in part, formulated in direct opposition to the so-called “speculative” philosophy of history. While still influential in some quarters, this tradition of thought was generally rejected for abandoning the “proper” historical task of describing and explaining the unique events of the past in favor of a misguided focus on the objective system of rules that were presumed to govern this function, therefore determining the meaning of historical events by allowing them to be related to their ultimate telos. According to Danto, who discussed the “speculative” philosophy of history in the opening chapter of his “Analytic Philosophy of History,” “At all events, it should be clear that the expression ‘the whole of history’ covers more than does ‘the whole of the past.’ It covers, as well, the whole future…,” an attempt at historical “prophecy” that he argues reflects a fundamental logical flaw in any such theory.

In his criticism of this position, White turned the entire issue on its head by shifting the central referent of history from the past “as it happened” to the text as it

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was constructed, using the linguistically based arguments of the narrativists in order to force a reconceptualization of the relationship between a piece of written history and the past to which it refers. White would have agreed with Danto that the “speculative philosophy of history” attempted to formulate rules governing the functioning of history. His fundamental difference was his belief that such an attempt was both possible and necessary, because there existed between the historical text and the “actual” past the unbreachable divide of narrative emplotment. As a result, the rules governing the functioning of history could and did exist, because history is a human invention, the structure of which is shaped by the linguistic patterns underlying its written construction. Although individual historical writers can appear as if they are concerned only with describing a specific segment of the past, and not with a larger attempt to define the rules governing the functioning of history, this means only that they are implicitly referring to the philosophy of history embodied by the mechanics of explanation already adopted by the historical discipline as a whole, and not that such systematic consideration has been avoided altogether. Given this logic, White concludes that the philosophies of history espoused by thinkers such as Hegel or Marx differ only in degree from the explanatory style deemed properly “historical” by the discipline. Therefore, the near universal rejection of thinkers of this ilk by the mainstream of the historical profession cannot be based on any set of logical arguments, and can only be supported by relying on considerations referring to positions outside of the confines of the discursive field. “There are no extra-ideological grounds on which to arbitrate among the conflicting conceptions of the historical process and of historical knowledge…Since these conceptions have their
origin in ethical[value-based] considerations, the assumption of a given epistemological position by which to judge their cognitive adequacy would itself represent only another ethical choice.⁹⁰

The result of this line of consideration would prove to be one the most definitive characteristics of White’s work. Building from this position, White claimed that, far from being “value-neutral,” the general strategies of explanation employed by the historical discipline should be understood as an ontological argument about the nature of reality and society that had been reified into an unquestionable norm. Furthermore, the acceptance of this ontological argument by the historical discipline had a significant effect on the present. Because of the extent to which history is used as the ultimate arbiter of reality in western society, the nature of reality described by history has the ability to sharply circumscribe the range of meaningful possibilities of human action. As a result of this power, White argues that the form that it has taken must be analyzed in terms of its political and ideological functions for the power-relationships present in the current day. “There does, in fact, appear to be an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of reality. That is to say, simply because history is not a science, or is at best a proto-science with specifically determinable nonscientific elements in its constitution, the very claim to have discerned some kind of formal coherence in the historical record brings with it theories of the nature of the historical world and of historical knowledge itself which have ideological implications for attempts to understand ‘the present’ however this present is defined…Commitment to a particular form of knowledge predetermines the

kinds of generalizations one can make about the present world, the kinds of knowledge one can have of it, and hence the kinds of projects one can legitimately conceive for changing that present or for maintaining it in its present form indefinitely.  

In “Metahistory,” White divides the issues that he had raised in this manner into the categories of ideology and explanatory mechanism. The first of these corresponds to the general moral understanding of human society held by the historian, reflecting their political views and therefore their vision for what a “good society” would look like. “They [ideologies] represent different attitudes with respect to the possibility of reducing the study of society to a science and the desirability of doing so; different notions of the lessons that the human sciences can teach; different conceptions of the desirability of maintaining or changing the social status quo, different conceptions of the direction that changes in the status quo ought to take and the means of effecting such changes; and, finally different time orientations (an orientation toward past, present, or future as the repository of paradigm of society’s ideal form).  

The explanatory principle refers to the general understanding that the historian holds of the ways in which the historical field functions, essentially consisting of the types of relationships that determine the connection between different events within history. Within each category, there are a variety of choices available to the historian, and like the type of story-form in which the historian emplots his facts, the

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ideological basis or explanatory mechanism by which he arranges his data makes up one of the primary means by which the historian imparts unity and meaning onto the otherwise chaotic field of historical data.

To quickly summarize, up to this point, I have retraced the logical steps by which White argued that the primary task of an historical account is to provide meaning to an inherently meaningless chronicle of events, a task that is accomplished through the use of figurative language to describe the events so that the reader is able to subsume them into the pre-existing meaning structures available in their general culture. Furthermore, I have noted how White argued that every historical account includes a philosophy of history that explains the basic types of relationships that exist within an historical field, and that therefore determines the manner in which events can be explained. Finally, I have discussed the manner in which White connected both this explanatory mechanism and meaning-creating emplotment with the ideological values that a given historian subscribes to, values that are closely related to the general understanding that the historian holds of both the nature and the possibility of change inherent to human society.

In “Metahistory,” White describes the three levels of historical writing (ideology, explanatory mechanism, and story-archetype) as each consisting of four categories, the nature of which he derives from various systematic thinkers within linguistic theory and the social sciences.\(^93\) While White rejects the possibility of a

\(^93\) For ideology, White draws on the work of Karl Mannheim, and divides the level into the categories of Conservatism, Liberalism, Anarchism, and Radicals. For “explanatory strategy,” he uses the system of Stephen C. Pepper, who divides historical argument into Formist, Organicist, Mechanistic, and Contextualist
pre-determined connection between the choice of category made in one level with the
choice made in another, he “believes that the types of interpretive strategies are
structurally homogeneous with each other,” such that, for instance, a romantic
emplotment would tend to fit with an ideographic form of historical explanation and
an anarchistic mode of ideological implication.\textsuperscript{94} Because of these “structural
homologies,” a descriptive scheme that would appear to allow for a significant variety
of historical approaches (3 levels times 4 categories equals 12 possible combinations)
begins to take on an element of structural rigidity that does not necessarily follow
from the basic logic of White’s arguments.

In many ways, all of this is merely the supporting structure for White’s theory
of poetic tropes, a linguistically based form of analysis that, to a great extent,
provides the conceptual force that drives the system as a whole. According to White,
tropes exist as a result of the poetic content that is present in all writing, reflecting the
basic linguistic devices by which terms or objects can be related.\textsuperscript{95} These tropes are
taken to describe the means by which it is possible to characterize the underlying
structure of relationships as they exist within the historical account, relationships
categories. For story-archetypes, he relies on the work of Stephen Frye, and divides
the field into Romance, Tragedy, Satire, and Comedy.

\textsuperscript{94} White, \textit{Tropics of Discourse}, 70.

\textsuperscript{95} An attempt to precisely define the nature of the trope is complicated by a certain
level of ambiguity within White’s thought, the full implications of which will be
discussed later in this chapter. That said, this ambiguity is in no way confined to
White alone. While a variety of thinkers employed the concept of tropes in order to
describe the ways in which thought/writing were structured, there was a significant
debate concerning the level (i.e. in language, in thought, in the unconscious) on which
tropes could be understood to function. For a fuller discussion of alternate systems
that used tropes during this period, see Hans Kellner’s “The Inflatable Trope as
Narrative Theory: Structure or Allegory?” and “Tropology vs. Narrativity: Freud and
“constitutive of the structure that will subsequently be imaged in the verbal model offered by the historian as a representation and explanation of ‘what really happened’ in the past.”

Deriving the basic details of his system from work of Kenneth Burke and Roman Jakobson, White describes a system of tropes divided into the four possible options of Metaphor, Synecdoche, Metonym, and Irony. These four tropes can be understood as denoting relationships in which one object can validly be described in terms of its “similarity or difference to another” (metaphor), its macrocosmic-microcosmic relation of quality (synecdoche), its place in a in part-whole relationship (metonym), or by means of a view of all linguistic descriptions that doubts the fundamental validity of any comparison, including the stability of the connection between words and objects (irony). To a certain extent, the application of the concept of tropes to historical writing can be understood as emerging from a further elaboration of the long-held Narrativist position, that the practice of history functions in a manner fundamentally different from the sciences. This difference was, as has been previously discussed, located in history’s reliance on narrative form and its accompanying goal of providing meaning/understanding instead of explanatory/predictive knowledge. Accepting the basic suppositions of this argument, White looked to expand upon on it by analyzing the functioning of the language of these narratives as they appeared in historical writing. Filtered through the lens of literary theory, this approach lead White to recognize that there are levels of meaning generating activity present in historical writing that have been entirely neglected by previous methods of analysis. Primary among these unrecognized aspects is the extent

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of the role played by the tropes in allowing historians to formulate their understanding of the past.

Ultimately, White concluded that the physical sciences, despite the possibility of paradigmatic shifts in their conceptual framework of description⁹⁸, operated according to a single shared understanding of the modality of the basic relationships that govern the contents of their study field. In contrast, the historical profession has no such linguistic stability, and is therefore subject to the “conceptual anarchy which is characteristic of ‘fields of study’ still unreduced to the status of genuine scientific disciplines.”⁹⁹ White identifies the cause of this failure to linguistically cohere with the historically specific and politically motivated manner in which the historical profession underwent a process of disciplinization. Because this process was based on political fiat rather than organic cohesion, White argued that existence of a non-technical and fluid vocabulary still continued, allowing historical accounts to utilize radically differing tropic formulations of the basic nature of their field, and causing conceptual battles of a kind that simply did not exist within the natural sciences. “Historiographic disputes will tend to turn, not only upon the matter of what are the facts, but also upon that of their meaning. But meaning, in turn, will be

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⁹⁸ “What formal terminological systems, such as those devised for denoting the data of physics, envisage is the elimination of figurative usage altogether, the construction of a perfect ‘schemata’ of words in which noting ‘unexpected’ appears in the designation of the objects of study. For example, the agreement to use calculus as the terminological system for discussing the physical reality postulated by Newton represents the schematization of that area of discourse, though not of the thought about its objects of study. Thought about the physical world remains essentially figurative, progressing by all sorts of ‘irrational’ leaps and bounds from one theory to another- but always within the Metonymical mode.” White, *Metahistory*, 33.

construed in terms of the possible modalities of natural language itself and specifically in terms of the dominant tropological strategies by which unknown or unfamiliar phenomena are provided with means by different kinds of metaphoric appropriations…

In essence, White argues that all human thought has an implicit need to organize the basic nature of the underlying structure of any field of knowledge prior to the active discernment of any of the objects of knowledge that could be said to exist within this field. White calls the process of determining this basic structure the act of prefiguration, which should be understood as occurring—in the fashion of a Kantian a priori—not alongside or underneath perception, but as a part of the process by which perception moves things from the formless chaos of the not-perceived into the field of thought. According to this conception, it therefore becomes impossible to separate the nature of an object from the tropic configuration of the field in which it is understood. Applied to the field of history, this means that one cannot speak about “the past” outside of the tropic configuration in which it has already been placed. “Discourse [of which troping is the primary element] is intended to constitute the ground whereon to decide what shall count as a fact in the matters under consideration and to determine what mode of comprehension is best suited to the understanding of the facts thus constituted…” While this might appear to be highly similar to the concept of “frames of description” described by Mink, the difference of tropic configuration lies in the way that it functions behind and through the objects being described. Whereas the product of a “frame of description” can be actively

100 White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 72.
apprehended by the reader and then challenged through rational discussion, the
linkage between tropes and the basic nature of language makes them problematically
ungraspable due to their fundamental role in the configuration of any understanding
of the nature of reality. Because of this, tropes offer no point on which to anchor
intersubjective discussion; different tropes render the reality that is being troped
fundamentally different, and as a result, their functioning becomes far more basic to
historical writing, and the problems that they raised proved to be far more challenging
to the discipline as a whole.

**Critical Analysis**

Although it is clear that the concept of linguistic tropes holds a place of vital
importance in White’s system, his articulation of the actual role that they play is
highly ambiguous, easily leaving the reader without a clear understanding of precisely
how White understands them to practically function within the processes of historical
thought and writing. Far from being the result of inconclusive theorizing or
inadequate explanation, it is possible to read this ambiguity as being a tremendously
productive aspect of his system, allowing it to function in such a way so as to appear
conceptually and logically unified while enabling certain elements to covertly assume
a position at the forefront of the work’s rhetorical impact and at the head of its
functional implications. This occurs despite the lack of sanction provided for such
functioning by the stated logic that “officially” governs the system. This disjunction
between the stated and discursively “felt” implications of White’s work can be used
as a productive vantage point from which to examine the position that this body of
theory was able to assume in relation to the broader disciplinary discourses of history,
a position that does much to explain the incredible influence that this work had on the field as a whole.

Of fundamental importance to this “productive ambiguity” is the manner in which the linguistic tropes differ from the other categories used in White’s descriptive schemata. These categories, reflecting a variety of aesthetic and intellectual choices made by the historian, can be said to function at the level of concepts or ideas, and are therefore firmly anchored at a fairly high level of cultural complexity. Regardless of exactly how the historical/cultural status of an idea is considered, the categorical options given by White’s theory all suggest entities with enough independent presence to allow for their critical/self-reflexive apprehension by those engaged in the writing of history, thereby allowing a clear element of conscious choice in the selection process. However, because tropes function at the lowest possible linguistic level, they operate in a completely different manner, and can therefore only be perceived through an analysis focused on the structure instead of the content of historical thought. This raises a significant question of intentionality on the part of the historian. If “it is by figuration that the historian virtually constitutes the subject of the discourse; his explanation is little more than a formalized projection of qualities assigned to the subject in his original figuration of it, and furthermore, the basic concept of this figuration requires that it necessarily occur prior to the historian’s interaction with the body of historical evidence, thereby functioning in a manner “precognitive and pre-critical in the economy of the historian’s own

consciousness,\textsuperscript{103} it appears valid to ask whether White has articulated a system of complete linguistic determinism, one in which historians search the past to obtain the meanings that they themselves have just finished placing there. This impression is especially difficult to ignore when one considers the large-scale “tropic cycle” that White believes is underlying the stylistic/conceptual progression of the nineteenth-century historians that he has chosen to discuss in terms of a “closed-cycle development. For each of the modes can be regarded as a phase, or a moment, within a tradition of discourse which evolves from Metaphorical, through Metonymical and Synecdochic comprehension of the historical world, into an Ironic apprehension of the irreducible relativism of all knowledge.\textsuperscript{104} This tropic progression, which moves through history and therefore seemingly outside of the control of the individual historian, reflects a general working out of the possibilities of historical language, even to the point at which intellectual positions with far reaching real-world consequences seem to be ascribed to the independent movement of this system. “The actual elaboration of these possibilities…plunged European historical thinking into the ironic condition of mind which seized it at the end of the nineteenth century and which is sometimes called the ‘crisis of historicism.’\textsuperscript{105}"

\textsuperscript{103} White, \textit{Metahistory}, 31.
\textsuperscript{104} White, \textit{Metahistory}, 38.
\textsuperscript{105} White, \textit{Metahistory}, XII. For a criticism of White’s deeply problematic and generally unconvincing consideration of the relationship between the dynamics of tropological cycles, the work process of individual historical writers, and the general reading public that ultimately served as the arbiter of historical success through their choice to read (and thus to render historically notable) the historians that White has chosen as exemplary of their time, see the article “The presuppositions of \textit{Metahistory}” by Maurice Mandelbaum, in “\textit{Metahistory: Six Critiques}”, Middletown: Wesleyan University press, 1980, 38-54.
This possibility of a linguistically based determinism noticeably clashes with other important aspects of White’s basic theoretical project. Of these, perhaps the most important is White’s conviction of the importance of critically reflexive thinking, which he considers to possess the ability to overcome the “crisis of historicism” caused by the ideologically and intellectually problematic historiographic position held by much of the discipline. “I do not deny that the Formalism of my approach to the history of historical thought itself reflects the Ironic condition from within which most of modern academic historiography is generated. But I maintain that the recognition of this Ironic perspective provides the grounds for a transcendence of it. If it can be shown that irony is only one of a number of possible perspectives on history, each of which has its own good reasons for existence on a poetic and moral level of awareness, this Ironic attitude will have begun to be deprived of its status as a necessary perspective from which to view the historical process. Historians and philosophers of history will then be freed to conceptualize history, to perceive its contents, and to construct narrative accounts of its processes in whatever modality of consciousness is most consistent with their own moral and aesthetic aspirations.”

The possibility of attaining a self-constructed freedom through historiographical choice holds a place of deep importance in White’s thought, one that is present from its very beginnings. In an interview discussing formative influences, he discusses the impact of the existentialist conception of humanity to his intellectual and philosophical development, saying, “I think that the existentialist notion of the

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situation that calls for choice and commitment or renunciation, is the peculiarly human one… It seems to me that you can’t live a human life without structure, but you can’t live a personal life without the event, without the situation of choice…so there’s a sense in which the possibilities of choice may be determined by the situation, but choice is still necessary within it, including the choice of rejecting the structure of the situation, the revolutionary choice. And for me this has no grounding in transcendental concepts; I think it has to do with the human condition.”

For White, the goal of his theoretical work is not merely to describe the “prison-house of language” that formed the ultimate limit of possibility for so many structuralist philosophers, but to provide the basis for a position from which it would be possible to take meaningful action. In reference to the practice of history, this position can be understood as one in which historians would be able to free themselves from the normative styles of emplotment supported by the traditional orientation of the discipline of history, enabling them to construct historical work able to fit their times and circumstances rather than the conditions that existed in the period when the basic academic practice of the discipline was first set.

There is an unbridgeable gap between this belief and the theoretical argument for the “pre-cognitive and pre-critical” position occupied by the tropes; this

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108 “We do not have to impute dark ideological motives to those who endowed history with the authority of a discipline in order to recognize the ideological benefits to new social classes and political constituencies that professional, academic historiography served and, mutatis mutandis, continues to serve down to our own time.” White, Hayden. The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 1987, 61.
constitutes, a fundamental flaw in the logical structure of White’s theory. Analyzed in purely philosophical terms, the discovery of such a flaw would either consign White’s work to the scrap-heap of systematic philosophies, or require an effort to plug the hole, and thereby “salvage” the system. However, both of these approaches are based on a judgment that considers the success of a work in relation to its consistency within a single type logic. In direct contradiction to this principle, the genius of Metahistory, and of White in general, is its refusal to function in such a one-dimensional manner. Instead, White’s rhetorical embrace of a multi-logical, and thus inherently contradictory, vision goads his readers to come to an evaluation that takes the work on its own terms, and that therefore will judge it based on the conditions that it enacts, the goals that it attempts, and the context in which it was created. With this as a model, the discovery of a contradiction within White’s work should be considered an opportunity, indicating an area in which two or more irreducible spheres of logic meet by means of a rhetorical (or tropic) seam in the text. The analysis of this disjunction can be used as an exploratory wedge, making it possible to delve beneath the logical structure of Metahistory’s surface and uncover the heterogeneous configurations of its underlying conceptual dynamics, a rhetorically ordered dimension of the text the functioning of which is usually concealed by its exterior.

Within “Metahistory” and “Tropics of Discourse,” White’s previously discussed goal of “historiographic freedom” is closely related to two possible applications of his theory, both of which are vital to the ultimate rhetorical/conceptual functioning of the system as a whole, but neither of which are necessarily logically
important to the general schematic. The first of these applications is in many ways similar to the conceptions behind the Marxist idea of cultural critique, essentially claiming the possibility of “revealing” the true nature of an ideology, and thereby allowing those formerly functioning within it to see the actual nature of their position and actions. Functioning in this manner, White’s explication of the tropic nature of historical explanation could potentially allow historians the freedom to recognize the ways in which the disciplinary establishment of the profession is based on a certain set of explanatory modes that do not necessarily exhaust the full possibilities of historical writing. “It may be observed that if historians were to recognize the fictive [read here as constructed] element in their narratives, this would not mean the degradation of historiography to the status of ideology or propaganda. In fact, this recognition would serve as a potent antidote to the tendency of historians to become captive of ideological preconceptions which they do not recognize as such but honor as the ‘correct’ perception of ‘the way things really are.’” The self-knowledge that it is possible to gain through the proper application of theory can enable a transcendence of one’s tropic position, thereby allowing the historian to choose an emplotment based on a more clear-sighted understanding of his/her cultural/disciplinary context. This possibility is seen in White’s previously mentioned belief that “the recognition of [an] ironic perspective provides the ground for a transcendence of it.” In many ways, the second important application of White’s theory is the constructive counterpart to the disruption of ideologies just mentioned. It posits that, given the undeniable impact that historical understanding can exert on the

beliefs and self-conceptions of those for whom it is written, it is the duty of historians to construct a past that will be useful for the society in which they live. Once it has been accepted that the methodological objectivity of the historical discipline is itself implicated in any number of social agendas, it becomes impossible for one to practice history without taking an active stance related to institutional and personal value-systems, and as a result, the writing of history becomes an act fraught with moral implications. This idea can be seen in the sentence following the one quoted above, in which White states that “Historians and philosophers of history will then be freed to conceptualize history, to perceive its contents, and to construct narrative accounts of its processes in whatever modality of consciousness is most consistent with their own moral and aesthetic aspirations.” Such a productive history could then function as a deeply positive element in human culture, enriching and deepening the experience of life.

Taken together, these twin programs for the application of White’s theory can be understood as sketching out, even if only in the barest possible manner, a general portrait of White’s personal philosophies of both history and human nature, as well as the way in which the moral implications of these philosophies relate to the content of his theoretical work. However, the exposition of these beliefs is inextricably bound to the theoretical systematizing of Metahistory, the formalist approach of which smoothly integrates them into the whole. This makes it nearly impossible to accurately pin down their true nature because of the ways in which they, functioning

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110 White, *Metahistory*, pg 434
111 “And historical consciousness will stand open to the re-establishment of its links with the great poetic and scientific, and philosophical concerns…” ibid.
according to a different order of logic from much of the rest of the system, primarily reveal themselves through the theoretical formulations as they are stated on the surface of the text. I believe that understanding this underlying theoretical system is absolutely vital for truly grasping the import, both historically and philosophically, of Hayden White’s work. Not only is it necessary to gain a more nuanced understanding of the structural connections between these beliefs and the formally articulated theoretical content of White’s work because of the effects that these relationships had on the functioning of the text as a rhetorical/aesthetic whole, but it is equally important to note that this underlying system carries significant content in its own right, including many of the most important (and least considered) aspects of White’s philosophical work.

In order to fully engage with this material, it is necessary to switch the analytical approach being used. Instead of drawing examples from “Metahistory” and “Tropics of Discourse,” it is necessary to move towards a more historical form of investigation, reading White against himself by tracing the development of his ideas in his earlier writings before the systematic extension that they underwent as they were integrated into the overarching structure of the texts. Such a reconstructive process is necessary to destabilize the appearance of an evenhanded functioning based on an entirely neutral form of logic, which is one of the single most important rhetorical attributes of Metahistory. The straightforward and self-confessed “formal” approach that White adopts throughout the text does an exemplary job of masking the varying levels of importance that he has actually assigned to the various parts of the system. The result of this masking is that conceptual linkages made for highly
specific reasons appear to be governed solely by a “value-free” and logically-consistent structure.\textsuperscript{112} By analyzing some of White’s more telling early work with an eye for the exposition of ideas that would later be subsumed within the whole of Metahistory, we can see their independent nature and their role in the later writings.

The first of the texts considered in this manner will be “The Structure of Historical Narrative,” published in Clio in 1972. Safely falling within the bounds of the Narrativist tradition, and clearly reflecting a significant (and self-admitted) level of influence from Louis O. Mink,\textsuperscript{113} the article offers an interesting (although by no means revolutionary) addition to the basic theoretical corpus of the philosophy of history, a body of work with which it is far more closely connected than any of White’s later writings. In the article, White presents his understanding of ways in which a piece of historical writing can generate a range of “explanatory effects,” working on multiple levels through its inclusion of several different types of information. In arguing this, White seems primarily focused on establishing the existence of a specifically literary form of meaning/understanding in historical

\textsuperscript{112} In this criticism, I was highly influenced by Hans Kellner’s exemplary essay “A Bedrock of Order: Hayden White’s Linguistic Humanism.” “Drawing its hermeneutic wagons into a circle, Metahistory assumes the posture of the master-text by forcing any prospective critics to address it- that is, to name it- on its own terms. It is perfectly possible to assault the text on a variety of grounds, and it is certainly possible to disagree with the contention that a ‘purely formal’ approach (or any other) is ‘value neutral.’… A confrontation with Metahistory cannot begin from without because the book and its theory claims to comprehend and neutralize any such assault before it is made.”(Kellner, Language and Historical Representation, 194.)

\textsuperscript{113} In White’s notes to the article, he names “The autonomy of Historical Understanding,” “Philosophical analysis and Historical Understanding,” and “History and Fiction as modes of Comprehension,” stating hat “all three are illuminating of the problem I am dealing with, and much of what I say is an amplification of some of the points raised by Mink in these articles.” White, Hayden. “The Structures of Historical Narrative.” \textit{Clio}, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1972), 20.
writing. He posits that this “literary” effect is a result of the necessity of narrative in historical writing, a term that he argues should not be taken to refer to a discernable story operating through a temporal progression (a definition that implies the possibility of non-narrative histories), but rather as a structuring function that exists in “any literary form in which the voice of the narrator rises against a background of ignorance, incomprehension, or forgetfulness to direct our attention purposefully, to a segment of experience organized in a particular way.” Given that all historical accounts are built on the basic model of demonstrating/showing the reader elements of the past collected and organized according to some kind of system, this definition of narrative ensures that a narrative effect is present even in works that deliberately opposed presenting a meaningful temporal progression.

By distancing the concept of narrative from any necessary connection to a chronologically ordered story, and redefining it as the basic structuring mechanism of the text, White was able to formulate a far more nuanced understanding of the organization of an historical account. Instead of the clear separation that was usually posited between “following a story” and explaining/analyzing the causality of historical events, White’s conception of a single dominant narrative voice allowed him to explain the ways in which the various levels of information contained in historical writing could function in a heterogeneous arrangement capable of producing multiple kinds of fundamentally differing explanatory effects, while still functioning according to a unified structure. At this point, White moves to introduce

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115 This was a particularly pertinent issue because of the efforts by those working within the Annales school to remove all trace of narrative from their historical works.
the concepts of story and plot as vital elements of a heretofore misunderstood aspect of historical writing. This argument, which would later be expanded into the theory of emplotment seen in Metahistory, claims that in order to create a meaningful account from a set of chronologically ordered events, it is necessary to introduce into these events pieces of literary information that allow the reader to assimilate them into a pre-existing structure. The first type of this literary information occurs at the level of the “story,” in which the historian indicates to the reader the ways in which a specific event should be assimilated into the temporal organization of the developing narrative. This information takes the form of motifs, which “mark off phases in the story; they organize data centripetally, so that the reader can tell when he is leaving one phase of a story and is entering upon another.” This is then opposed to plot information, the role of which is to indicate to the readers, by means of a “relational cryptogram by which, not the events of the story, but the story itself [is] encoded in a particular way,” that they should understand the specific story with which they are engaged as corresponding to one of the various types of story-archetypes available within a given culture. These archetypes provide the basic cultural grammar by which the varieties of meaningful stories are delineated. “Historians invoke such rules as a matter of course to give general form to their narratives, to reveal what was “really happening” in their narratives, beneath or behind the stories they have been telling, all along.”

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117 White, “The Structures of Historical Narrative”, 17
118 ibid.
This article presents the foundation for the theoretical system that White would elaborate Metahistory. However, for any reader of that book, the element that is most noticeable about “The Structure of Historical Narrative” is the total lack of challenge that it contains. Despite sharing many of the most influential theoretical elements of Metahistory, it has none of that text’s rhetorical bite, and therefore none of its impact. Faced with this obvious difference in affective quality, it becomes necessary to ask the following questions: how do the differences between “Metahistory” and “The Structure of Historical Narratives” transform the effect of the theoretical elements shared by both? How does the context in which the literary arguments of “The Structure of Historical Narrative” find themselves after being integrated into Metahistory alter their implications? Essentially, what allows these primarily theoretical arguments to become so strongly politicized?

While the arguments that White makes in the article for narrative structuring of historical accounts, and the existence of multiple levels of explanatory effects within historical writing, are both essentially unchanged in relation to their presentation in Metahistory,119 the primary difference seems to lie in the nature of the other categories of information that are considered to exist within the historical work. Most notably, at this point in White’s theoretical development, the ideological typification of historical writing seems to be entirely absent. Although this exclusion is the most obvious reason for the difference in tone/effect displayed by this essay, an equally important difference results from the lack of clearly delineated categories of explanatory strategy, a variety of “explanation effect” that the article discusses in

119 To the point that White even mentions the possible “Comic, Tragic, or Ironic significance” that can be assigned to a plot with the article.
terms that seem to allow the sphere to function more independently, primarily because it appears to rely on an extra-historical system for its justification. Instead of these elements, White describes the other types of explanation offered by historical writing in terms clearly linking them to the two primary positions of the existing philosophy of history. In place of what would come to be explanatory strategy, he admits the validity of the Hempelian call for covering laws, while the effect generated by following the story (the actual organized events as opposed to the plot) is described, in Dray-derived terms, as the valid explanatory effect that can be obtained from following a series of events through to their conclusion. Overall, although it is clear that White has seriously begun to consider the theoretical possibilities inherent in the synchronic structuring of an historical account, an idea first suggested in the work of Mink and here elaborated in his reconception of narrative within an historical account, they are as of yet a relatively isolated set of concerns, remaining safely in the placid realm of the philosophy of history. It is in this unproblematic discursive identity that we can begin to understand what is missing in this article, and conversely, to better understand precisely why Metahistory is so effective. “The Structure of Historical Narrative” represents something fairly unique

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120 Although the full importance of this will only become clear in light of the discussion of the functioning of tropes that will occur later, suffice it to say that the possibility of the historical account creating valid knowledge through the investigative methodology that is part of the research process would undercut White’s arguments for the non-referentiality of the historical text due the mechanics of emplotment.

121 Admittedly, he expresses a support for their position with a certain amount of hesitancy, stating “I am not saying that the Hempelian analysis is not useful for identifying and assessing one level on which most historians operate,” while never actively embracing them through anything but the double negative seen here. White, “The Structures of Historical Narrative”, 14.

in the canon of White’s writing; a piece the content which is entirely theoretical.

Although White’s work often includes a significant theoretical aspect, its nature is to situate itself on the limits of the accepted boundaries of the disciplinary discourse in which it is located. Its signature move is the sudden crossing of those conceptual/disciplinary boundaries, the lateral rhetorical jump into another system of logic, destabilizing a discussion through the reference to a different but closely linked discursive system. Although the argument put forward in this essay does call on literary theory to expand the existing discussion of the philosophy of history, it never strays beyond the disciplinary bounds of that discussion. Note the rhetorical difference that exists between a system in which the various options for historical meaning-effects are described as the result of different positions already delineated by, and therefore within the philosophy of history, and one in which these same options are based on the radically different ground of politics or linguistic theory. In the case of the latter, the entire argument is able, if properly constructed, to struggle free from the discursive sphere that gave it birth, putting those who would attempt to respond to it on the defensive by requiring they take into account its activity within the existing disciplinary debate, while causing a discourse-altering discussion around the connections that it has drawn between this discursive sphere and previously unrelated areas of intellectual/cultural activity or meaning.

If one accepts the argument that the exceptional impact generated by Metahistory cannot be traced to the purely logical qualities of the work, it becomes necessary to search elsewhere for conceptual forces capable of producing such effects. As stated earlier, this force seems to exist within White’s philosophy of
history. To locate a clear exposition of this thought in White’s work, two earlier essays become vital pieces of evidence: the well-known “Burden of history,” published in History and Theory in 1966; and the far less read “Politics of Contemporary Philosophy of History,” published in Clio in 1973. In many ways, the position that White stakes out in these articles is, like the theoretical work analyzed in “The Structure of Historical Narrative,” deeply similar to what would later be presented in Metahistory and Tropics of Discourse. However, by considering these ideas articulated outside of the comprehensive system in which they would eventually find a place, it is possible to see elements and aspects that would otherwise remain hidden.

In “The Politics of Contemporary Philosophy of History,” White launches a full-scale polemical assault on almost everything connected to history in the English speaking world, engaging in a scathing critique of what he takes to be the fundamental mistakes in the self-conception and practice of the Anglo-American historical discipline, as well as the equally problematic errors in the basic approach that has defined the philosophical style of the entirety of the Analytic philosophy of history. The central theme of the essay is, as stated in the opening sentence, the claim that “history [has become] a serious philosophical problem where before it could be regarded primarily as a technical exercise.” In this, White actively rejects the dryly analytical style that had been the dominant tone of discourse within the Anglo-American philosophy of history up until that point, making a claim for the extent to

123 Although this latter work was originally written as an address to a conference in 1969.
which the study of history should be understood to connect to urgent ethical/political questions of human existence and society. In the course of the essay, he expands on this claim by arguing that, in particular, the philosophy of history has failed to recognize the fact that the style in which discourse is conducted reflects a specific set of political choices, the implications of which are not admitted because the fact that the adoption of such a style represented an active choice had been reified to the point where it could no longer be readily grasped.

The primary route by which White attempts to reveal this hidden ideological content is by means of an examination of the disciplinary reasoning that formed the basis for the rejection of the historical work of the so-called “metahistorians” of the nineteenth century, a rejection that he understands as crucially tied to the political concerns attendant on the initial formation of the “modern” historical discipline. “Although all are agreed that the way we view history, the expectations we bring to the study of history, and the kinds of satisfactions we get from it, are in some way tied up with the kind of person we are and the place we occupy or desire to occupy in our society or the kind of society we might want to see constructed in our immediate future, we appear unable to grant that a world-transforming vision can appropriately be brought to the study of history.” Because of the truly radical nature of such a world-transforming vision, such a view cannot be accommodated by the “standard” historical language used to describe the non-revolutionary conceptions of history tied to the spectrum of political positions deemed possible/acceptable within society. As a result, those who accept such a view are forced to articulate their insights through a

language that does not share the presuppositions that bound traditional
historiography. “To espouse a radical vision of history is to be willing to use radical
language, a language which, by its very nature, brings under question the conventions
of ordinary educated speech of the society under attack...anyone who wants to
change society in politically radical ways will be forced to articulate what the
philosophers call a ‘metahistorical’ system.” 126 The fact that such systems are then
categorized as being “other” than normal, standard, responsible historical writing
therefore does not reflect a judgment about the validity of the writing being described,
but instead should be understood as resulting from the basic theoretical/discursive
orientation of the discipline as it is currently constituted.

White sees this existing historical establishment as tied to a conceptualization
of society firmly based on an acceptance of the inalterability of the status quo. His
critique of this linkage reveals a powerful circular logic that fails to recognize that the
very way in which the vision of the status quo was, given the nature of political
thought within European society, necessarily based on support from the discipline of
history, 127. The result is an endless loop; history depends on society for its

127 And specifically on the type of historical thought that developed in relation to the
growth of the communities of memory/identity and the modality of justification that
he considers to have been required for the process of nationalization in Europe. In
support of this claim, he turns to Hegel, writing, “this principle [that required the
development of historical thought] was nothing other than politics, which was both
the precondition of the kind of interest in the past which informed historical
consciousness and the pragmatic basis for the production and preservation of the
kinds of records that made historical inquiry possible...The content (or referent) of
the specifically historical discourse was...the peculiar relation between a public
present and past which a state endowed with a constitution made possible.” White,
Hayden. “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory.” History
ethical/political conceptions of the possible, while society relies on historical claims to support its existing power structures. White argues that this cycle of mutual reinforcement was instituted by means of a process of disciplinization, in which the historical profession was awarded the cultural prestige necessary to ensure its status as an objective arbiter of truth. This status could only be achieved by forcing the heterogeneity of potential historical discourses into a single unified field, one that would function within a societally determined set of political/ethical values. Because of the contingent nature of this process, “It would be profoundly unhistorical to think that the form that historical reflection assumed in the nineteenth century was the definitive form that it had to take for all time.” This argument, in conjunction with White’s identification of the political basis for the dismissal of all but a relatively narrow band of discursive options as historically “possible,” leads him to firmly reject the supposed necessity of the current composition of history. Given White’s argument for the ideological implications of the reified state of the existent practice of history, it was easy for him to expand this critique to the philosophy of history as well, claiming that its adoption of an “objective” stance towards the analysis of history was, in itself, an ideological statement about the “naturalness” of the state of this discourse.

Once these topics have been considered in this manner, it becomes possible to enter into a discussion in which the basic constitution of the historical field can be made a serious object of inquiry. Given the intimate connection established between the conceptions of the field of historical possibilities and the political sphere, such a

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conversation would be profoundly different than the one that was then occurring within the philosophy of history. It would introduce types of ethical and social consideration that would have to make reference to value-orientations (and the corresponding regimes of discourse in which they were based), the locus of which would necessarily fall outside of the boundaries of the field, and would therefore bring its relative intellectual isolation to an end. “The question that ought to interest us, I think, is which of the forms of Metahistory now available to us bids fare to become the ‘ordinary history’ of the next age--and more importantly, what kind of vision of our past, present, and future do we need to permit us to make transition to a next age.”

In the last paragraph of the essay, White goes on to argue even more baldly for the importance of a presentist concern for the cultural and political configuration of the historical field, stating, “It is perhaps now time to begin asking whether any intellectual or scholar, philosopher, social scientist, or historian can afford the luxury of ignoring the ‘involvement’ or ‘confrontation’ or even ‘relevance’ of the sort that militant social reformers are (legitimately) demanding of the academic community all over Western society. I am speaking about the possibility of radical inquiry into the relationship between specific philosophical and historical and social scientific conventions and the social systems in which and by reference to which such conventions are authenticated.” Notice- what White is demanding is not a radical history, but a radical philosophy of history. It is the philosophical and conceptual presuppositions providing the structure for the historical discipline that are his focus,

far more than the specific content that is articulated within this field. This connects
with his argument for the re-evaluation of the metahistorians, one that he would make
repeatedly throughout the seventies. For White, Metahistorians such as Marx or
Hegel provide a vital model because of their ability to connect politically or
philosophically radical thought about the nature of history with a form of historical
inquiry in a way that “standard” historians, because of their reliance on a shared
interpretive framework based on a disciplinarily derived presuppositional uniformity,
are not able to attempt. The metahistorians offer an example of a body of historical
thought that is, by necessity, theoretically self-aware, in a way that White found
absolutely essential.

Why this theoretical self-awareness is so important is never made clear within
“The Politics of the Contemporary Philosophy of History.” In order to better
understand this crucial point, it is necessary to turn to the arguments made in “The
Burden of History,” where, in a mild change of focus, White concentrates his analysis
on the present-day (1966) position of the historical discipline, instead of on the
philosophy of history. As a result of this shift, the article reveals more of both
White’s own philosophy of history, as well as what might be termed his historical
methodology, essentially the ways in which he understands the historical field to
function. In a vituperative tone similar to the one employed in “The Politics of the
Contemporary Philosophy of History,” White launches into another provocative
diatribe, arguing that the Anglo-American historical profession was, considered as a
whole, dangerously out of touch with the changing intellectual orientations that had
increasingly characterized the positions of both the sciences and the arts, the two
spheres that the historical discipline traditionally understood itself as bridging in its practice. White claims that up until this point, historians had reacted to this criticism by retreating into the safety of a conservative disciplinary posture, dealing with the assaults by relying on the traditional authority that had accrued to their intellectual orientation purely by dint of its age. This response, which attempted to deal with the criticism by denying the validity of those making it, failed to adequately consider the nature of the relationship between the specific form in which the historical profession was constituted and the needs of the rest of society, particularly those of fellow intellectuals and academics. “Historians cannot ignore criticism from the intellectual community at large, nor take refuge in the favor which they enjoy with the literate laity…Far from providing a source of comfort, there might be a genuine cause for concern when any learned discipline loses its occult character and begins to deal in truths which only the general public finds exciting. Insofar as historians pretended to belong to a community of intellectuals distinguishable from the literate public in general, they have obligations to the former that transcend their obligations to the latter.” White believed that the disgust shown by a generation of (primarily European) intellectuals towards not only the study of history, but the cultivation of a historical consciousness in general was, if not entirely warranted, then at least indicative of a growing problem with the intellectual position into which the historical profession had long been fixed.

White argues that this crisis has been caused by the steadfast refusal of historians to face the fact that their discipline, having no subject matter or methodology that is specifically its own, is ultimately a style of intellectual activity whose authority is primarily based on the cultural and ideational structure of the specific period of time in which it was initially professionalized. Taking this argument further, White points out that the eminent successes that had heralded the discipline’s development into maturity could also be understood as resulting from the possibilities inherent in this same context; the ability to produce work that was deeply meaningful for its period could not be considered a the natural right of the discipline. “Historians of this generation must be prepared to face the possibility that the prestige which their profession enjoyed among nineteenth century intellectuals was a consequence of determinable cultural forces. They must be prepared to entertain the notion that history, as currently practiced, is a kind of historical accident, a product of a specific historical situation…”

A statement of this type has far-ranging implications, revealing both a complex historical argument based on a specific interpretation of the relationship between historical conditions and the cultural/intellectual products that can be constructed in relation to them, as well as an underlying epistemological belief in the contextual nature of knowledge/truth-claims that extends to the level of large-scale

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134 “Historians have conventionally maintained that neither a specific methodology nor a special intellectual equipment is required for the study of history. What is called the ‘training’ of the historian consists for the most part of study in a few languages, journeyman work in the archives, and the performance of a few set exercise to acquaint him with standard reference works and journals in his field. For the rest, a general experience of human affairs, reading in peripheral fields, self-discipline, and sitzfliessch are all that are necessary.” White, Tropics of Discourse, 40.

135 White, Tropics of Discourse, 29.
cultural structures. In this circumstance, these two positions lead White to conclude that, given the extreme changes to the basic structures of knowledge/culture that had occurred within the general western intellectual system during the twentieth century, history stands in a real danger of losing its ability to function meaningfully with society. Such a decline cannot merely be attributed to a shift away from history by the intellectual patrons who once supported its activities, but instead indicates the decreasing ability of works created within this particular discursive field to actually function as meaningful cultural products. Still attempting to utilize the paradigms of understanding and action that were appropriate during its initial period of disciplinary constitution during the mid-nineteenth century, the theoretical basis of the historical profession has been stretched to the point that it is actually in danger of snapping.

What is needed then, is a conscious re-definition of the function of history, one that would enable the discipline to “reestablish the dignity of historical studies on a basis that will make them consonant with the aims and purposes of the intellectual community at large, that is, transform historical studies in such a way as to allow the historian to participate positively in the liberation of the present from the burden of the past.” Given White’s arguments about the value-commitments inherent in any philosophy of history, and the inextricability of such a philosophy from the “actual”

136 Particularly cutting is White’s statement that “When historians claim that history is a combination of science and art, they generally mean that it is a combination of late-nineteenth century social science and mid-nineteenth century art. That is to say, they seem to be aspiring to little more than a synthesis of modes of analysis and expression that have their antiquity alone to recommend them. If this is the case, then artists and scientists alike are justified in criticizing historians, not because they study the past, but because they are studying it with bad science and bad art.” White, Tropics of Discourse, 43.

137 White, Tropics of Discourse, 41.
practice of history, such a re-conceptualization would have to be made on grounds that included an active consideration of the moral, epistemological, and political basis on which the historical discipline would be (re-)constituted. It is in response to this set of challenges that White turns to the metahistorians. By demonstrating that it is possible to consciously attempt to create a shift in the discourse of history, therefore altering the orientation/arrangement of its conceptual and cultural linkages\textsuperscript{138}, while simultaneously practicing history in a manner that maintains the traditional cultural role of the discipline, the self-consciously theoretical approach used by the metahistorians appears to be the only answer to an otherwise unsolvable problem. However, given the clear resistance of the historical discipline to countenancing any such style of historical activity, it would first be necessary to create an extra-disciplinary argument with enough influence to allow a change to be made to the conceptualization of what the practice of the historical discipline “really” consists of. Because any inter-disciplinary attempt would immediately be deemed unacceptable, failing to reach the mainstream of the discourse because of its origin, the attempt would need to be based in the already-existing philosophy of history, the only extra-historical discourse with the crucial position of having already staked an interpretive claim on the description of historical functioning and practice. Based in this position, a radical re-description would be far less likely to be viewed as an intrusive intervention into history--that is not how the two discursive fields tended to align. Such a redescription would also not be understood as possessing the ability to exert a

\textsuperscript{138} In light of the importance that White assigns to this discursive element of the work of the metahistorians, it is no surprise that he claims that the “the principal philosophers of history were also (or have lately discovered to have been) quintessentially philosophers of language.” White, \textit{Metahistory}, xi.
transformative effect on the field; whether accepted as true or false, the project would be understood as making a true or false statement about the way things already were. Needless to say, because of its analytical genealogy, those who practiced the philosophy of history tended to possess a far greater familiarity with theory than did most of the practicing historians of the time, thus making it a far more hospitable base for a serious theoretical intervention.

It is now time to return to the analysis of the function played by linguistic tropes in the text of Metahistory. Within this system, the tropes can now be understood as providing a mechanism capable of linking the various aspects of White’s general project in such a way so as to allow all of them, whether theoretically or politically based, to function as a concerted whole within the general discourse of the philosophy of history. As was seen in the analysis of “The Structure of Historical Narrative,” the linguistic theory that made up the accepted domain of the Anglo-American philosophy of history had almost no capacity to move beyond its role of providing a value-free consideration of historical functioning. Because of the pre-existing conceptual structures that defined the intellectual topography of the discipline, it seems unlikely that any such analysis would be able to be meaningfully expanded into the kind of interpretive activity that White believed necessary, while still remaining sufficiently centered within its original discursive sphere for it to create a significant impact. Correspondingly, the type of politically motivated arguments that White made in both “The Politics of the Philosophy of History” and “the Burden of History” seemed to fall well outside of the standard bounds of any of the stable disciplinary discourses of the time, and therefore could not generate any
significant transformative effect. Without an accepted meaning-structure into which they could be fitted, the arguments presented in the articles seem to have vanished without a trace. Looking at the record of citations, almost all of the attention that they garnered did not occur until after the publishing of *Metahistory*.

*Metahistory*’s application of linguistic tropes allowed White to shift both of these problems in a fundamental way. Because the basic concept of the tropes was drawn from the limited range of the “acceptable” pre-analytical philosophers of history—namely the “critical” tradition of Croce and Vico—their use did not confine White to the speculative ghetto. 139 More importantly, the way in which they operated was firmly in the style of linguistic analysis that had already been successfully claimed by the Narrativist school of philosophy of history during the course of their battle against the Hempelians. Yet unlike the kind of narrative analysis suggested by Mink, Gallie, or Danto, White constructed his system in such a way as to allow the tropes, despite their base in the disciplinarily “safe” ground of linguistics, to generate a claim over the actual content of historical writing. This sudden expansion of the interpretative jurisdiction of the philosophy of history amounted to a theoretical coup, representing a power-grab of enormous proportions. While the Anglo-American tradition had been previously been entirely confined to analyzing the ways in which historical accounts functioned and produced meaning at a logical/linguistic level, 140 White’s work posited an utter transformation of the conceptual orientation, and therefore of the discursive position, of the field. His work changed it from a

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140 Even when historical meaning was dealt with, it was rarely analyzed at a level significantly larger than short paragraph.
transcendental description of the a-historical and non-contextual functioning of history to a situated, committed form of interpretation actively engaged with its present-day cultural surroundings.

With all of this in mind, the reason that White conceived of the tropes in such a deterministic fashion becomes increasingly clear. Because the tropic configuration of the historical field occurs prior to any active historical work that can be done in such a field, the tropes are understood to produce the basic modalities of poetic description by which an historian conceives the nature of history. If the tropes were not “pre-conscious and pre-critical,” that is, if the historian were able to consciously apprehend their use in the manner that is conceivably possible for the other categories of historical description, it would have been far more difficult for White to rhetorically enact the expansion of the philosophy of history that he desired. It is only because the tropes function entirely beyond the reach of the methodology of the historical profession, while remaining within the analytical purview of the philosophy of history, that a radically new interpretive power could be asserted. The linguistic, non-value oriented nature of this tropically-based interpretive scheme is entirely dependent on the disciplinary position held by the philosophy of history. Therefore, when White discusses the categories into which the ideological or explanatory style of an historical work can be sorted, these analytical moves are supported by the concrete linguistic basis that undergirds the whole structure. “Every proper history presupposes a Metahistory which is nothing but the web of commitments which the historian makes in the course of his interpretation on the aesthetic, cognitive, and ethical levels… we can move the problem back to a ground prior to that on which the
emotive, cognitive, and moral facilities can be presumed to function. This ground is
that of language itself… In this passage, it is possible to witness the full scope of what White has accomplished. He has not only firmly established the fact of the various value-orientations present in historical writing, but he has anchored his analysis of these categories on “language itself.” This moves the essential plane of engagement away from an active discussion of validity of his political or aesthetic characterizations of historical writing, and towards the determinate sphere of tropes, the battles about which will necessarily be fought within the descriptive regime established by the system. Such a move is possible because the “formalist” style and theoretical credentials of the tropes allow them to call upon the interpretive authority of the philosophy of history, an authority based on the properly “objective” analytical tradition in which the philosophical tradition had been constructed.

In “The Politics of the Contemporary Philosophy of History,” White criticized those engaged with philosophical tradition for failing to come to terms with the political and social implications of the “objective” analytical style that they had long cultivated. In Metahistory, he turns this style against them, embracing this same “objective” tone for his description of the functioning of the historical field so as to be able to ignore the radical interpretive effect that results from the application of his theory. The full systematization that White embraced in Metahistory, with its complex charts and quaternary categories, arranged according to the even-handed symmetry of its building-block structure, should be seen an vital part of a sophisticated rhetorical strategy. White’s thought is difficult to deal with precisely

because of the apparent matter-of-factness with which it appears to go about its analytical work. The full implications of his work are present and yet veiled from direct view. Although it is clear that the text is accomplishing something important behind its stated arguments, it is extremely difficult to detect exactly what this might be. I believe that this careful construction, by amplifying the logical power of White’s numerous theoretical insights, provided the means by which he was able to exert such an effect on the philosophy of history.

Conclusion

To properly evaluate the full implications of White’s work, it is necessary to consider the masterly way in which it exploited the position that it occupied in the respective discourses of history and the philosophy of history, two seemingly close-linked disciplines that were, as has previously been discussed, often somewhat at odds. In a certain sense, the implications of this body of work to the field of history are fairly obvious, primarily because they tend to be stated outright within the text. Its argument for an analysis of historical production that focused on the textual and literary elements that any historical account must necessarily include, and its linkage of these elements with a variety of value-based considerations through the application of the scheme of poetic tropes, presented a significant challenge to the basic self-understanding of the historical discipline. Particularly provocative in this respect is the potential that the work has to provide the justification for a complete rejection of any “real” relationship between the historical text and the past that it attempts to represent. This threat appears most clearly in the system of tropes which, because of their determinate nature, can be read as consigning historians to an infinity of mirror
gazing in which all they are capable of doing is to reinterpret the material that they have already shaped through prefiguration, therefore negating the possibility that a disciplined historical effort is capable of producing information that does not directly reflect the initial predisposition of the historian. Although perhaps less revolutionary given the long-held belief in the artistic aspect of historical writing, as well as the extent to which the issue had already been considered in relation to the pre-existing Narrativist philosophy of history, it is also important to note the impact created by the epistemological implications of White’s assertion of the fundamentally literary and creative base of all historical writing. The previous Narrativist philosophers (particularly Danto) had discussed the extent to which meaning could be created through descriptive linguistic means. In contrast, the formalization given to this argument by White’s model of the historical account as the emplotment of a meaning-free chronicle, along with the accompanying claim of the existence of infinite varieties of emplotment that were all equally plausible because of their aesthetic basis, presented another significant challenge to the discipline as a whole. While these arguments were not necessarily accepted outright by the practitioners of traditional history, once the “linguistic turn” introduced a theoretical reconsideration of the nature of the texts, these arguments would come to be increasingly influential, especially in subdisciplines (such as medieval history, historiography, or intellectual history) that relied on consciously composed accounts for their primary sources materials.

While White has had a considerable effect on history, this is nothing compared to the immense impact that he had on the philosophy of history, where he
not only managed to transform the field, but to essentially recreate it in his own theoretical image.\textsuperscript{142} Yet despite this clear importance, elucidating the nature of the relationship between White’s work and the philosophy of history is less obvious than it might appear. This is primarily a result of the fact that, with the sole exception of “The Politics of the Contemporary Philosophy of History,” and unlike essentially every other intellectual who was actively engaged with the philosophy of history, White spends little or no time discussing the nature of the field in his writing.\textsuperscript{143} Like the effect of the systematization on the effectiveness of his theoretical argument, I believe that in this case White’s mastery of rhetorical misdirection was his greatest ally. By focusing the entirety of his theoretical argument on the nature of history, he was able to bypass the extent to which his work was actively committed both to changing the disciplinary, cognitive, and conceptual status of the philosophy of history, and moreover, to changing these aspects in a manner that had direct political/social implications for their functioning in the future. In this regard, the primary accomplishment of White’s work is not the theory of tropes, which as previously discussed, offers little more than an expansion of the discipline’s pre-existing linguistic focus. Instead, it can be seen in his ability to create a basic realignment of the way in which the Anglo-American philosophy of history was

\textsuperscript{142} As stated by Frank Ankersmidt, “without [Metahistory] historical theory would have disappeared from the intellectual scene somewhere in the 1970’s or 1980’s and, what is more, nobody would have missed it. Domanska, Encounters, 77.

\textsuperscript{143} Indeed, besides the occasional mention of Mink, who was one of the primary influences on the development of the linguistic aspects of White’s work, there is almost no mention of the other figures who were attempting to deal with similar issues during the same time. Even in White’s reviews of others work during this period, he primarily kept himself to those writing within his primary “historical” field of 19th century historians/philosophers of history such as Hegel, Croce, or (in something of a chronological stretch) Vico.
positioned in relation to the broader disciplinary/discursive configuration of the academy.

By relying on the ethical and terminological approaches drawn from an eclectic combination of both American and Continental literary theory and philosophy as a crucial aspect of the basic structure of his work, White forced those attempting to engage with his work to follow his theoretical lead regardless of whether they were in support or criticism of his conclusions. The point was not whether or not the overall account of historical functioning that was detailed in his work was accepted, but whether he could open the field to a discussion of the basic concerns that informed this account. As has been seen, these concerns were formulated so as to question the “objectivity” of both the historical discipline and the interpretative act, as well as, at a more basic level, to reopen the numerous issues surrounding the importance of rhetoric in all academic discourse. In order to substantively debate the claims made by Metahistory, it was necessary to actively consider these arguments—to do this, it was necessary to deal with a body of theory that had not previously been a major element in the accepted intellectual corpus of the philosophy of history. Over time, the effect of this forced exposure was, in conjunction with other academic developments, responsible for shifting the basic intellectual paradigm of the discursive field. An indication of what was to come can be seen through the names that White does mention as influences in his work. Levi-Strauss appears often, as does Roman Jakobson, while Sartre assumes the role of the most notorious anti-historical thinker. Among Anglophone literary critics, Northrop Frye and Kenneth Burke predominate. What is notable about these names is the
extent to which they indicate the developing linkage between the philosophy of history and the burgeoning field of literary studies, a roughly defined area that would come to be closely linked with the multi-disciplinary “critical theory” of the eighties. What is important to see in this is the extent to which White’s work allowed the formation of a philosophy of history with a radically new structure. Decisively breaking from its now-distant past in analytic philosophy, the philosophy of history (increasingly coming to be labeled historiography) was able to maintain itself as a well-defined area of investigation, one complete with major academic figures and journals in which to publish, while fundamentally changing the theoretical basis on which its operations would continue. While historiography would remain as an area of inquiry, White’s work allowed for a significant blurring of the disciplinary affiliation of those engaged with its central problematics. Following his introduction of literary theory into historiographic theory by means of his well-received argument for the narrative/textual nature of the historical work, the questions of the philosophy of history were increasingly open to those with a background based more purely on literary/cultural-studies, setting the stage for a new generation of writers who would go on to change and complicate the nature of the field even further.
Chapter Three- The Linguistic Turn and The Philosophy of History

In spite of the immense influence that it would eventually come to exert over a generation of both historians, the initial impact of White’s work was anything but revolutionary. Instead, it would be far more accurate to describe the process as a decidedly slow reception, one that would only pick up speed and intensity through the efforts of a new generation of historians, philosophers of history, and literary scholars who began to occupy an increasingly visible position within the academy starting in the early 1980’s. As has already been discussed, White’s first major text *Metahistory* was published in 1973. Although it received a number of favorable reviews in historical journals such as the *American Historical Review* and *History and Theory*, as well as more interdisciplinary journals such as *Diacritics*, most of the reviewers seemed to regard it as something of a commendable oddity, a “bold and imaginative book” aimed at altering the practice of historians. Given the basic structure and focus of *Metahistory*, it is unsurprising that these reviews tended to deal with White’s work as a particularly theoretical example of historical writing, critiquing him about both the complexity and “obscurity” of his analytical system,

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144 “There are well over a thousand citations of White’s work in philosophy of history in those twenty years [between 1973 and 1993]. That averages over fifty a year, but the series starts very small (only one in 1974, and still only eighteen in 1978) and rises to close to a hundred per year in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s.” Richard T. Vann, “The Reception of Hayden White,” 146.


while tending to praise him on (at least parts) of his historiographical analysis. In many ways, what seems most striking about these reviews is what they fail to include, namely, the sense of intense theoretical partisanship that would soon come to characterize the discourse around the issues of narrativity. Even those reviews that do recognize the extent to which his philosophy of history represents a significant challenge to the functioning of history considered it more as a useful addition to the theoretical canon than as a radical threat. For instance, in his review for the *Journal of Modern History*, John Clive questions where White’s focus on the literary elements present in the historical text “leaves historical truth? Where does it leave the possibility that history, as much art as science, is a cumulative discipline rather than a series of relativistic accounts? Should history departments shut up shop and range themselves under departments of literature? Rather than becoming seriously concerned about these questions, he brushes them aside and goes on to recommend the book for its ability to “teach one to regard the great works of history from a fresh and fruitful point of view, as well as to become aware of new dimensions in one’s contemporaries.

A particularly excellent example of this type of reception can be seen in John S. Nelson’s lengthy and, in many ways, excellent review of the work in

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149 ibid.
History and Theory. Following White’s theory with great perspicuity, Nelson points out the many flaws in his application of the system of tropes to individual thinkers, as well as the systemic problems of his arrangement of the various explanatory levels in terms of clear “vertical” homologies.\textsuperscript{150} Although he begins the essay by stating that he will comment on what he identifies as White’s three projects, namely “(1) a philosophy of historical explanation; (2) a history of the degeneration of nineteenth century historiography and philosophy of history into ‘ironism’- a condition of relativism, skepticism, and self-doubt; and (3) a proposal for transcending such ironism, thus revitalizing the contemporary apprehension and comprehension of history,” he quickly becomes sidetracked in a lengthy critique of White’s arguments about ironism, and fails to deal with the full implications of White’s view on the nature of history. Thus, he writes “White would have us focus entirely upon the poetic-tropal prefiguration of the historical field, ignoring completely the ‘seams,’ however ambiguous, of the field prior to prefiguration. White’s stress on the importance of language is more than well taken. As noted earlier, White suggests that the historian’s style of language is ‘what constitutes the facts themselves.’ This may be true, but we must not read too much into it.\textsuperscript{152} This is simply not a statement that it would possible to make ten years later. Combined with the example of Clive’s

\textsuperscript{150} “With no apparent justification, White restricts the comprehension of possible vertical combinations of ‘explanatory’ categories to sole Metaphorical perspectives. Metaphor, after all, is the mode of homology- of structural similarity and difference. Such restriction is very odd in the context of White’s Metahistory, which emphasizes possible recourse to prefiguration by any of the tropes, with no a priori limitation to one or another such mode of consciousness.” John S. Nelson, Review of: Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe, by Hayden White. History and Theory, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1975), 86-87”

\textsuperscript{151} Nelson, review, 74.

\textsuperscript{152} Nelson, review 90.
review, it serves to demonstrate the extent to which the changed context of the linguistic turn would serve to radicalize the entire issue of language. It is not that the reviewers who read the work during the 1970s were unable to grasp its argument, but that they did not imagine the extent to which such a critique could shake the stability of historical practice. Without its connection to the (developing) theoretical zeitgeist, *Metahistory* would almost certainly have remained a dense and technical scholarly tomb, a dead letter 434 pages long.

Enforced by the general lack of interest in narrative theories of history, this status continued until almost the end of the decade, when a number of influential books or articles by White, Frank Kermode, Louis Mink, Lionel Gossman, and others began to actively cultivate the style of literarily oriented studies of history that had been hinted at by *Metahistory*. A number of these articles\(^\text{153}\) were brought together and published by the editors of *Clio* in the influential collection “The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding.” This volume, published in 1978, is particularly important due to the way its mixture of essays by literary critics, historians, and philosophers presaged much of the work that would come to dominate much of the next decade, as well as because of its clear focus on an analysis of “the relationship between the content of historical writing and the literary form in which it is presented… [as well as the importance of] three propositions: that the historian’s

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\(^{153}\) The volume included “History and literature: reproduction and signification,” by Lionel Gossman, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” by Hayden White, and “Narrative form as a cognitive instrument” by Louis O. Mink. Gossman’s article in particular merits mention, mixing an historical summary of the shifting relationship that was understood to exist between literature and history, and an analysis of the current state of the relationship of literary theory and historical writing through a discussion of the work of Rolland Barthes.
use of narrative directly influences the extent to which he conveys an accurate and intelligible understanding of the past, that historical narrative raises problems for the philosophers concerned with the nature of historical knowledge, and that this literary form provides an opportunity for the literary critic to gauge the aesthetic dimensions of writings whose literary appeal has or will be proven more lasting than their standing as definitive history.\textsuperscript{154} In many ways, this statement could be taken as a manifesto for the linguistic turn as it would function in relation to the increasingly connected disciplines of literary criticism and the philosophy of history, including the necessity of interdisciplinary investigation (mentioning philosophers, literary critics, and historians by name), a focus on the historical text considered in and of itself as a primary locus of meaning and function for the historical account, and its claim that the historian’s narrative represents the primary means by which he/she organizes the text.

That these arguments were still thought to be controversial can be seen by the fact that the editors found the need to defend this approach, writing “One might think it necessary that an intellectual project of such respectable antiquity and such obvious intellectual interest to several academic disciplines would require no special presentation and defense. We think it does. We believe that the literary and aesthetic qualities of historical writing have been given too little attention by historians, philosophers, and literary critics, particularly in America.\textsuperscript{155}” Throughout the rest of the introduction, they continue to support this statement, repeating that historical


\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
writing is a valid object for literary studies, that philosophers of history have produced a valuable body of work in their analysis of the explanatory nature of narratives, and that historians can benefit from considering these extra-disciplinary types of analysis. In regards to this last claim, a slightly different tact is taken. Specifically articulating that literary studies or philosophy do not comprise a new set of methodologies for use in historical analysis, the editors seek to emphasize the extent to which historians already utilize these methods in their practice. “We do not propose to ask him to become a literary critic or a philosopher but to persuade him that he is already a litterateur and may thus have something to learn from the observations of literary critics and philosophers about the nature of historical narrative…when he sets out to tell the story of what he has learned from his research he has committed himself to language and to form. We would argue that he will make literary choices at every turn and should make them consciously. Language is as much a part of his materials as his research data, and command of his materials is the mark of good historian.” In this, it is possible to see a rhetorical strategy highly similar to the one used by White in *Metahistory*, and indeed one that did a great deal to enable the tremendous success of the linguistic turn over all. Because historians are already clearly implicated in language use, a literary analysis of their work is far harder to resist than, for instance, the scientific pretensions of the covering law model. Furthermore, this new linguistic orientation tied itself decisively to the philosophy of history, which was seen as having already provided “insights into the

156 Canary and Kozicki, *The Writing of History*, X.
nature of historical narrative, and narrative generally. Also important to note is the prominent role that the editors ascribe to White, who is described as one of (and perhaps the sole) figure able to bridge the gap between all three fields in his work. His presence in this volume thereby assumes the role of both its guiding spirit, and a legitimating factor through his ability to call on the academic authority of both philosophy and history to support the validity of the literary analysis that, for the most part, provided the dominant methodology for the essays.

Thus, it is possible to see signs of the developing configuration between the philosophy of history, theoretically oriented historians, and literary criticism that would eventually form the basis for the “linguistic turn” within the humanities. The development of a cohort of scholars interested in exploring the possibilities of this combination coincided with a radical increase in the popularity and influence of White’s writings that, while demonstrating little change in their basic argument, were able to find an increasingly receptive audience for the theoretical claims and interpretive strategies that they contained. This change, which according to Richard Vann closely coincided with the publishing of “Tropics of Discourse” in 1978, “saw the remarkable extension of White’s influence beyond the relatively small number of historians, philosophers, and literary critics who had quickly recognized his importance…[White’s work was] picked up by hundreds of literary critics and others interested in what became a veritable ‘narrative turn’ in the human sciences.” In many ways, the inter-disciplinarity of these investigations and projects proved to be

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158 Mink’s essay is the primary exception to this statement.
the defining factor of the turn as a whole. Closely tied to the importation and creative re-contextualization of a number of post-structuralist French thinkers and the growing reach of a body of literary scholars interested in expanding the types of text that they could analyze, the linguistic turn would provide a space for a number of discourses and interpretive strategies that would otherwise have found it extremely difficult to flourish. A notable beneficiary of this would be the resurgent philosophy of history, for which the linguistic turn provided the chance to escape the pages of History and Theory, and for a time, to assume a far more dominant role in the general discourses of history.

It is important to note that none of this would have been possible if these developments had proceeded unilaterally, approaching history from the outside without any signs of reciprocation. To understand the disciplinary restructuring that accompanied the linguistic turn, it is therefore necessary to consider the related movements that occurred within history. During this period of intra-historical development, various sub-disciplinary groups began to move towards a more explicitly theorized conception of their practice. Moreover, because this theory tended to be based on the same kind of discursive and semiotic analysis being employed within literary studies, a bond was created between the two disciplines based on a number of shared approaches and subjects. Within history, linguistic/semiotic theory was primarily introduced into the general discourse through the channels provided by a select number of sub-disciplines. Often somewhat marginal in status, either because

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of their relatively recent development as a field of inquiry or because they had entered a period of academic decline, these sub-disciplines had less of the established orthodoxy or well defined approach that made the more “central” areas of study to which the linguistic turn could have easily been applied (such as political or diplomatic history) so resistant to the adoption of these methods of analysis\textsuperscript{161}.

Generally speaking, it is possible to identify intellectual, cultural/social, and gender/women’s history as the primary vectors by which linguistic theory was transmitted. Because each of these fields engages in a different type (and with a different object) of investigation, each tended to use the free-floating resources offered by the various bodies of theory in substantively different ways. The result of this was that when considered as a whole, the discourses influenced most heavily by the linguistic turn had little consistency in the way that they expressed this influence within their individual contexts. Thus, instead of considering the turn to be driven by the development of a unified body of theory, it is far more apt to described is as a movement within intellectual culture, one that existed as much through the adoption of a shared style as through the application of a well-defined set of conceptual tools.

\textsuperscript{161} Given this, the use of linguistic theory by these sub-disciplines must be understood not only as development driven by the considerations of historical research, but also by the jockeying for recognition, departmental power, and intellectual status by disciplines battling in a sphere of limited academic resources. Thus while many of the criticism that were made against the rise of the post-modern/linguistic turn may seem overly reactionary or theoretically naïve, claims that “The problem with the “privileging” of certain types of history necessarily implies the marginalizing of everything else. Those who do trendy work find it relatively easy to get jobs and eventually to get tenure” (reflects the truth that academic disagreements are never purely disinterested, and that the debates over the linguistic turn must be at least partially understood in this light. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, \textit{Reconstructing History: the Emergence of a New Historical Society}. New York: Routledge, 1999, 10.
Because these discourses developed rapidly over the course of the 1980’s, and because they tended to share a highly characteristic use/invocation of certain select figures (Foucault, Derrida, Lacan) and concepts/conceptual languages (discourse, semiotics), the linguistic turn can be described as having something of a general character. At its most basic level, it was a move towards “an interdisciplinary study of the history of meaning…[involving] a focused concern on the ways meaning is constituted in and through language,” one that tended to be coupled with a close engagement with questions of discourse, text, and representation.

Unlike bodies of theory that had remained firmly fastened to a single field, as was the case for psychohistory or cliometrics, the fact that the linguistic turn penetrated historical practice from a number of different directions greatly increased the extent to which it was perceived as single entity, with insights that were potentially applicable (and therefore threatening) to the practice of history as a whole. Working within a discipline that had long evinced a distrust for the legitimacy of work heavily influenced by any theory, be it post-structuralist or economic, many “traditional” historians found themselves challenged by what appeared to be a “deconstructionist” popular front, a unified block of subversives intent on destroying the very foundations of the historical discipline.

Attempting to ascertain the extent to which these fears were valid is quite difficult. Because of the conflict generated by disagreements about the linguistic turn, intensely polemical arguments became increasingly widespread within the discipline. The spiraling hostility that developed in the context of these arguments is the principle cause for the distance that quickly developed between the discourse about the turn, and the actual practice of those engaged with the new methods of analysis being proposed. While the former became the subject of an increasingly polarized and hyperbolic debate, the actual practice of the history seems to have dealt with the influence of the linguistic turn far more reasonably, gradually incorporating certain ideas (such as the importance of analyzing the function of discourse within society) while weighing and then discarding others (such as the lack of reality outside the text or the complete and total non-referentiality of historical writing).\footnote{For an excellent discussion of this, see “Narrative Persistence,” by Nancy Partner in \textit{Refiguring Hayden White}, ed. Domanska, Ewa, Ankersmit, Frank, and Kellner, Hans. \textit{Refiguring Hayden White}. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, 81-87.} This difference was not, however, necessarily discernible to those at the time. It is also important to note that the theoretical pragmatism of the present day was fairly slow to develop. During height of the linguistic turn, it was almost impossible to see the grey area between referentiality/textual-unity/material-reality and relativism/deconstructionism/semiotics, especially for historians who had little previous exposure to “theory.” Faced with what was perceived to be a yes or no decision about the nature of reality, many historians held an understandable fear that they were facing a fundamental threat to the continued existence of their discipline.
This perception was exacerbated by the nature of the sub-disciplines that had started this process. As mentioned before, the unfixed position of these disciplines is one of the principle reasons for their early adoption of the linguistic turn, both because the lack of a clear theoretical paradigm made such a move possible, and because linguistic theories were seen as a method with which to solve the significant intellectual problems that they were then facing. However, this situation also meant that these disciplines already contained a significant amount of theoretical and methodological fragmentation, along with the intense discord that usually accompanies such debates\textsuperscript{165}. This historic lack of consensus, coupled with the bitter resistance that formed in reaction to the use of the new theory almost immediately, meant that the linguistic turn never really held much unified disciplinary territory. Although it influenced increasingly broad swathes of historians in specific disciplines, those who did not accept its basic tenets continued to write and research according to their unchanged definition of how history was practiced, or rather, given the new challenge to this understanding, according to their increasingly fervent belief in how history should be practiced. Thus, the linguistic turn created a newly heterogeneous historical environment, one in which there existed significant theoretical differences not only between various sub-disciplines or schools of interpretation, but also within individual fields of research.

\textsuperscript{165} The existence of intense debates can be seen in the pre-linguistic turn work of all three disciplines. Within Social history, one can see the arguments between E.P.A. Thompson and the Althusserian Marxists, while intellectual history had the theoretical conflict between the contextualists like Quentin Skinner and the “history of ideas” of Arthur Lovejoy. The intensity of the political and methodological discourse surrounding Women’s History/Feminist history during the 1960’s and 1970’s really needs no further elaboration.
Aside from its importance for the practice of history, the growth of interest in these theoretical issues also spurred an increased examination of the nature of the inquiry and analysis that characterized historical research. Such an examination, made necessary by the need to answer the questions raised by the theoretical destabilization of the standard form of historical practice, tended to bring the historians of the linguistic turn towards a consideration of the issues and approaches that had been actively cultivated by the philosophy of history. As a result of this, the spread of the linguistic turn allowed a real convergence between the philosophy of history and the most theoretically sophisticated historians, one in which each provided support for the other. Without the increasing theoretical sensitivity displayed by major historians, the work of White and his fellow philosophers of history would have been able to reach a far smaller audience, and almost certainly would not have achieved the interdisciplinary prominence that it came to possess. Likewise, historians like Dominick LaCapra or Joan Scott received significant support for their textually critical style of analysis and their active consideration of the nature of historical inquiry from changes to the status of the historical work that had been heavily influenced by developments within the philosophy of history.

Because of the increased closeness that existed between the most theoretically aware (and thus often philosophically active) historians and the most historically engaged philosophers of history during this period, drawing a dividing line between the once distant fields becomes increasingly difficult. A similar problem can be raised with respect to the growing engagement of literary critics with subjects that were once the province of philosophers of history. Thus, in order to describe the field, it
becomes necessary to formulate a clear principle of categorization in way that was not previously necessary. Given the fact that many of the central questions that had defined the field of the philosophy of history since its inception had been adopted as primary concerns by a number of other (sub-) disciplines, how should one define the field? Given its decisive break from the analytical philosophy of science during the development of the narrative philosophy of history in the 1960’s, had the connection to literary studies instigated by White ended its independent identity? Should the field be defined by the continuity of those engaged with its discourse, or with the problems that it attempts to deal with? The answers to these questions cannot be decided empirically; they are, as I have indicated, entirely a matter of the definition and categorization by which a historian chooses to organize the field.

This said, it still remains to explain and justify how the decision to organize and separate these related discourses will be made, and on what basis. In order to do this, it is useful to consider the long-held differentiation between theory and practice as perhaps being capable of providing a dividing line between an intellectual activity that applies a self-reflexive theoretical component to its practice (the histories of the linguistic turn), and one that explicitly analyzes and theorizes about the functioning of another set of practices (the philosophy of history). This is not an argument about utility, but rather about the fundamental effects of orientation and identity. Because historians are trained and socialized by means of a specific set of academic experiences, and because their choice to become historians reflects a certain set of value-based decisions in relation to the social conditions in which they were raised
and educated, they tend to have a set of shared values and concerns. In addition, as has been argued by White, rather than being defined by any particular set analytical or methodological tools, the identity of the professional practice of history is based on its specific position within society, a position that it holds due to its nature as an academic guild able to give official accreditation, and one that results in a certain type of intellectual and cultural identity for its members. Thus, while a literary critic who holds a professorship in an English department can certainly write a work of history, or even many works of history, he or she will not be a historian in the sense

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166 Dominick LaCapra argues that it is possible to trace these types of identity formation to the relationships that occur in the processes of graduate training. “The most easily located instance of transferential relationships in historiography (and academics more generally) is probably to be found in the nexus between teachers and students. These relations are most intense in graduate study, particularly in the initial period: the teacher (who may, for the student, initially be an imago projected from written texts) is often intent on establishing a ‘presence,’ and the student, in a particularly vulnerable or even ‘regressive’ position, confronts for the first time the problem of a near total (and often phantasmatic) identity between his or her professional and personal self.” Hans Kellner offers a similar description when he considers how the identity of an academic discipline is created through the play of a number of professional anxieties. “Areas of formal study are, in my view, complexes of defenses against particular anxieties, anxieties whose kaleidoscopic changes shape and blur the entire discourse of the field...anxieties about identity and origins, the sublimated descendents of castration and birth traumas, haunt intellectual history today.” While neither author spends enough time with this issue to provide a fuller description of how disciplinary/professional identities are constructed and how this can effect the mindset of those who function within them, these descriptions suggest the kinds of mechanisms that might be in play in such situations.

167 This professional identity is strengthened by a number of institutional devices on the level of both the university (seats on committees, the search for new faculty members) and the professional organization (conferences, as well as journals/peer-review). Of course, the best-known discussion of these processes of professionalization (at least within American historiography) can be found in Peter Novacks That Noble Dream.

of being a member of this disciplinary group unless he or she actively attempts to join it (and therefore significantly alters the nature of his/her professional identity).

For historians, the influence of these factors will result in an orientation towards the issues of theory that is closely connected to their experience of functioning within the specifically historical mode of practice, experiences formed both by their academic responsibilities/identity, and their time spent researching and writing works of history. As opposed to this, academics whose disciplinary identity lies with the philosophy of history will deal with the same issues in a far different way; not necessarily more abstractly, but in a manner that reflects a subtly different conceptualization of history, one that deals with it as logical structure that defines a practice rather than as practice first and foremost. The conception of history held by a philosopher of history cannot take into account the uncharacterizable experiential content of historical work itself, primarily because of the exterior view of this practice that he/she must necessarily employ in order to engage with history philosophically. The point is that the practitioner of the philosophy of history is engaging in a practice, namely that of philosophy, while the historian deals with the practice of history. Both are capable of consciously reflecting on historical practice, and both may produce valuable results from their reflection. There will, however, exist a basic difference in the modality between these two products because of their different intellectual orientations. Fundamental to the recognition of this difference is the acceptance of the deep importance that accompanies disciplinary boundaries. While the configuration that they have assumed within the modern academy may be based on nothing more than historical contingency, the fact is that generations of scholars have lived and died
while working within them, and as a result, they have developed a complex web traditions and practices that is not reducible to a set of individual components.\textsuperscript{168}

In the context of the linguistic turn, it becomes necessary to differentiate between philosophy and theory as types of thought clearly related in their nature, but fundamentally different in their position, and therefore in their functioning. Because the two are so closely related, in the discussions that took place at the time, the term “theory” could potentially be used to describe anything within a large and heterogeneous body of thought.\textsuperscript{169} This slippage is a the result of the fact that, once French post-structuralist thought had been divorced from the disciplinary contexts in which it had developed, it became an analytical tool like any other, and was therefore no longer capable of being a determining factor in the investigation into which it was injected. Therefore, although much of this theory may have originally developed within philosophy, the application of its insights and structures into other practices does not make them philosophy, much as the introduction of Freudian concepts into other disciplines did not transform them into psychoanalysis. Although there does exist something of a sliding scale in this regard, it can be claimed that the nature of

\textsuperscript{168} “The institutions of secondary and higher education do indeed transmit implicit as well as explicit aspects of culture heritage; they inculcate life-styles and modes of conduct, along with forms of perception and cognition…defined in a wider sense, academic culture encompasses practices, institutions and social relations, along with beliefs.” Fritz Ringer, “The Intellectual Field, Intellectual History, and the Sociology of Knowledge.” Theory and Society, Vol 19, No. 3 (1990): 279.

\textsuperscript{169} In the article “Are we being theoretical yet?” John Zammito goes through four or five different definitions of the term, including “an orientation to language as such,” the work of “the neo-Freudianism of Lacan and the Marxism of Althusser…[as well as] Derrida and Foucault,” and “the new philosophy of history” exemplified by White. (John H. Zammito, “Review: Are We Being Theoretical Yet? The New Historicism, the New Philosophy of History and ‘Practicing Historians.’” The Journal of Modern History, Vol 65, No. 4 (1993), 784-785.)
the inquiry is traceable to the basic goals that underlie the work as whole\textsuperscript{170}.

Therefore, although one can incorporate any amount of philosophy into a historical work, it will not become a work of philosophy unless its goal shifts from the underlying orientation natural to the historical profession. Although history has a far more solid foundation to rely on, the philosophy of history has its own institutional tradition, based on both its development since the birth of its modern incarnation in the 1940’s, as well as through intellectual heritage that it received from the analytical philosophy from which it was descended. Although both of these traditions were submerged during much of the linguistic turn, their presence can be detected throughout, an analysis that is born out by their return to prominence in much of the important work that has been done in the field since.

During this period, the fundamental problematic around which the philosophy of history revolved was the connection between the account presented in the historical text, and the actual reality of the past. While in some ways, this can be seen as a continuation of the debate surrounding the explanatory validity of narrative accounts that had been the principle subject of the philosophy of history after the demise of

\textsuperscript{170} This claim is complicated by two basic issues. In terms of practical analysis, although this crucial point can easily be understood as existing, discerning it in an objective sense is almost impossible. At a more conceptual level, this entire issue becomes more complicated when one takes into account the historically contingent nature of the disciplinary identity that makes it possible. If the differences between (and the identities of) a discipline results less from any set of methodological or conceptual foundations, and more on the conscious and unconscious effects of its traditional practices, significant changes to these practices (such as those brought about by the linguistic turn) have the possibility of changing the nature of the discipline. Thus, an attempt to make distinctions between the philosophy of history and the discipline of history during the linguistic turn will always be problematic, because it is attempting to make clear distinctions within a process that is itself altering the basis for making those distinctions.
covering-law. White’s structuralist analysis of the historical text had fundamentally changed the grounds on which this discussion would be held. Although few (if any) of those engaged with the philosophy of history would embrace the entirety of his theoretical system, his method had proved its validity with enough success that a serious consideration of the rhetorical/tropic structure of the historical text could no longer be overlooked.

As a result, it was no longer possible to posit an unproblematic relationship between the explanation/description provided by the text and the actual occurrences of the past; language, shaped and distorted by poetics, had been too firmly interjected as a mediating term. This problem has proven remarkably resistant to a number of attempts to solve it, primarily because while neither extreme (that is, narrative realism or complete non-referentiality) has been able to establish itself as a satisfying explanation for the functioning of history, a theory able to place these essential tensions on new ground has failed to emerge from the resulting discussion. As the debates between supporters of realism and the aesthetic/tropic view of history had begun to ground to a stalemate, a variety of middle positions began to gradually assert themselves. Although these positions have taken a number of approaches, the most important and productive has been the return of a more traditionally analytic strain of the philosophy of history. By identifying the issue of the relationship between the historical account and the past as the primary problematic for the philosophy of history, it becomes possible to examine and organize the various positions in this debate purely in terms of their philosophical utility in relation to this issue.
One of the primary approaches taken towards the philosophy of history during the linguistic turn was the expansion of the inter-disciplinary task of analyzing the literary nature and linguistic structure of historical texts inaugurated by the project seen in both *The Writing of History* and *Metahistory*. Closely related to the style of intellectual history undertaken by Dominic LaCapra, or literary studies of Lionel Gossman or Rolland Barthes, this body of work can be differentiated from these relatives less by its analytical methodology or interpretive style, than by its explicit focus on considering the nature of the structural relations that exist within historical texts, and its attempt to understand the implications of these relationships for the nature of history. On the other side of the disciplinary divide, this approach differs from the more traditional forms of historiography in its consideration of the historical text as a “complex verbal structure” rather than an argument; it is less that the vision of the past contained within a great historical work can be evaluated as a falsifiable theory than that it can be explained as a specific aesthetic/ethical creation. That said, the works that can be grouped within the bounds of this approach to the philosophy of history easily shade off into these other fields, and while the territory that they cover can be extremely productive, without the kind of explicit theorizing that White included along with his textual analysis, they were able to do little to elaborate or advance the basic problematic of the philosophy of history.

One of the best examples of this can be seen in the work of Hans Kellner,¹⁷¹ which exemplifies both the problems inherent in this position, and the

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¹⁷¹ Kellner was in fact one of White’s former graduates students, and has, over the course of his academic career, “written about White more than anyone else.” (Vann, “The Reception of Hayden White, 147)
brilliant results that it is capable of achieving.\textsuperscript{172} In relation to the problematic of the field, Kellner’s work functions in a space of unexplicated tension between the functioning of the text as a text, and its ability to refer to the past. He metaphorically describes this dual nature by means of an extended metaphor concerning his opera glasses, which he realizes to be “an instrument of calculated distortion” after they are made useless by being “jolted out of focus.” However, once he has fixed them, they are again able to fulfill their function and, as a result, “the glasses themselves disappeared, so to speak.” Kellner expands on this as an apt example of the type of problems created by the theoretical awareness of the rhetorical and poetic artifice of the historical text. “To examine an historical text, we must see it ‘crooked,’ even if doing so makes it harder to attain the precise purpose of the text. To see the text straight is to see \textit{through} it- that is, not to see it at all except as a device to facilitate knowledge of reality.\textsuperscript{173}” By allowing Kellner to bracket the question of historical epistemology, this approach allows him to continue to examine how the underlying structures of historical texts shape the representations of the past that they produce.

\textsuperscript{172} Kellner also serves as a perfect example of the extent to which this approach is on the disciplinary margins. Although he started out as a historian, he later switched to a professor of English (ibid), and despite the fact that his work deals with the questions of historical knowledge and practice, in an interview contained in a collection of interviews with leading figures in the philosophy of history, he rejects this description, claiming that “I do not consider myself a philosopher of history because I have never been privileged to have those kinds of sensibilities that I believe are characteristic of philosophers. My own thinking is highly associative- basically metonymic thinking that my philosopher friends just do not engage in. I make connections that they do not recognize, but which I think of as essentially \textit{historical} connections,” and later going on to deny that he can “locate the contemporary philosophy of history at all,” before launching into a description of his own conceptualization of the fundamental anxieties that determine the nature of the historical discipline. (Domanska, \textit{Encounters, pg 41}).

\textsuperscript{173} Kellner, \textit{Language and historical representation}, 4.
without getting bogged down in the endless debates that this approach so easily invites. Furthermore, by enabling him to apply the analytical methods developed by White in his work, this theoretical move provides him with a type of insight that he may not have otherwise achieved.

The benefits of this approach to the philosophical and aesthetic consideration of historical works can be seen in “Disorderly Conduct: Braudel’s Mediterranean Satire,” a long critical analysis that hangs its interpretation on the importance of the way in which the content of Braudel’s massive work is structured by its author, a vital aspect of the text that its historical readers have primarily “ignored, patronized, or viewed as a questionable and potentially dangerous national quirk.” In opposition to this, Kellner claims that the effect of this structure is absolutely vital to the function of the work as a whole, establishing the basic nature of its “satirical” and self-contradictory identity. Furthermore, Kellner argues that it is the strength of the effect produced by the work as a whole, rather than any particular historical argument, that is responsible for the attention that it has continued to receive over decades since its initial publishing. By considering the Mediterranean as a unified work, containing far more than the sum of the data or the explanations that it provides, Kellner is able to explicate the profound power that an historical account can exert, ably demonstrating the multiple levels on which its explanation

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175 “The continuing interest in Braudel’s *Mediterranean* does not derive simply from its subject, nor from its congeries of techniques, apparatuses, ad information, nor even from the Metahistorical nature of its claims and project, although all these factors remain of the first importance. This work, history of the most uncompromisingly professional sort, as retained an authority after almost thirty years, despite professional onslaughts on its parts. The cause of this power is its fundamental ambivalence, the undecidability at the heart of it.” (ibid)
and description function. “The general effect of Braudel’s methods is not simply to re-orient the reader toward new and better perspectives. These anti-referential referents make objects disappear at the level of real meaning (geo-history, in which things are always shifting in their representations because names and descriptions will not hold or cover their referents) and make meaning disappear at the level of real objects…they present Braudel as a philosophical realist, offering the transcendent, the timeless, at the expense of the immanent.”

Although this type of approach may help elucidate how an historical work functions as an aesthetic text, it does not answer the problems posed by its still unexplained nature as an historical text of “the most uncompromisingly professional sort,” and therefore a text written from within a tradition that has embarked on the attempt to investigate and explain the true nature of the world. While Kellner can convincingly argue that the informed reader of history should “toggle back and forth, from naïve realism to anti-foundational skepticism” he fails to address the fact that the central problem of linguistic theory has never been for the reader of history, who has always found it necessary to move back and forth between the narrative of the text and the knowledge that it can only ever be the interpretation of a single individual, but rather for the writer of history and the discipline as a whole. This

177 Domanska, Encounter, 46
178 This is made only more puzzling by the fact that Kellner is clearly aware of the existence of this problematic. Discussing it in “triangular anxieties,” he defines this problematic as the awareness of the historical text as an allegory for the past. “The anxiety before allegory comes from the heightened awareness of the distance between what we mean and the texts we produce, or of the uncertainty between whether we can mean without producing a text, the existence of which always already undercuts the grounds of meaning... Hints of this anxiety, which I am suggesting here is the
discipline, founded on the basis of archival research and a methodology that stresses
the importance of scholarly objectivity, had been deeply shaken by the theoretically
based assertion that all it is capable of producing is textual representations, works that
are imaginatively and aesthetically constructed. By focusing on the textual
functioning of history, Kellner could certainly produce valid and useful work, but
proved unable or unwilling to attempt to provide a solution to this problem. This does
not reflect badly on him; it is surely a result of preference and personal interest.
However, one cannot help but believe that this project, by leaving so much so clearly
undecided, ultimately begs the question that it has assiduously avoided addressing.

Another scholar working in a similar boundary zone between the philosophy
of history, literary criticism, and intellectual/cultural history is Stephan Bann. Bann’s
similarity to Kellner is easily evident in his description of the project of the textual
analysis of historical works with which he is engaged. “The structuralist analysis of
historiography is not simply the ‘return of rhetoric,’ and rhetorical analysis…In so far
as it exposes the linguistic strategies of a historiography which defined itself by its
privileged relation to the real, this analysis becomes inevitably a demystification of
the ‘mythic’ forms of nineteenth-century historiography. It also becomes, by
implication, a critique of the historiography which has sought to maintain, even up to
the present day, the privileged status assumed by the new history of the nineteenth
deepest and most ‘affective’ of historical anxieties, are to be found in the discussions
of ‘language’ or ‘semantics’ in history; and in the simple realization that language
possess its own density, a dimension far more broadly significant than the
conventions of past historiography have recognized.” (Kellner, Language and
historical representation, 287).
Like many during the linguistic turn, Bann is highly aware that, because his work focuses on the textual structure of historical writing while also claiming to elucidate how that writing functions in relation to the past, it will fall somewhere in-between the boundaries of the existing disciplines. He is not quite a historian, and not quite a literary critic, but rather assumes the role of a “specially tailored interdisciplinary person,” (inventions, 33) who is able to fulfill the demands of both history and literary studies within his work. Despite the problems associated with this, Bann feels that it is necessary to assume such a position precisely because of the seriousness of the critical enterprise to which it is related. “The structuralist, or more generally ‘rhetorical’ analysis of historiography is not merely a pursuit which the critics can indulge in while the serious historians have their backs turned, since it is a method which leads us to ask fundamental questions about the status of historical enquiry, and to realize that the relation of the historical text to reality is itself a historical problem of the utmost interest.” Bann’s work is primarily content to trace the variable processes by which these relations emerged and in which they function, rather than attempting to put forth a systematic solution to this problematic. “It is not difficult to think of cases where the historical and the fictitious, the ‘scientific’ and the ‘poetic’, appear to exclude one another like oil and water. But this


181 Stephen Bann, *Inventions of History*, 35
mutual exclusion is not as absolute as it is made to seem…The fact that to maintain
the irrelevance to historiography of the fictional and ‘poetic’ procedures…is itself a
mythic attitude--a petrification before the Head of Medusa which…Ranke’s famous
saying has become.\(^{182}\) However, unlike Kellner, who seems to accept this as a
necessary and insolvable aspect of history, Bann’s response seems to sketch out a
more nuanced approach to the problem that emphasizes the possibility of change
through the alteration of disciplinary practice. In the place of the attitude towards
fiction mentioned above, Bann stresses the possibility of a creative history in which
the actual limits of these ossified options are tested through the creation of new works
able to challenge them. “What is required, however, is that the story-teller should be
conscious of the particular options that are open to him, and should not disavow his
poetics in a misguided regard for the signs of objectivity.” In this attitude, Bann might
fairly be understood as working more on the side of the historian-practitioner than the
philosophical system-maker. As a result, although his conclusions may point towards
a solution for the individual historian, considered as a philosophical strategy within
the discourse of the philosophy of history, such a position still offers no help in
alleviating the fundamental problematic of the text. Therefore, despite its partial
success Bann’s work still fails to make it possible to move beyond radical non-
referentiality.

While both of these approaches followed a structuralist/critical method
heavily influenced by White’s earlier work, during this period White himself had
moved towards to a more explicit consideration of the full implications of the

\(^{182}\) Stephen Bann., *The Clothing of Clio: a Study of the Representation of History in
narrative form. This approach, breaking from the structuralist systematizing that had marred much of the actual utility of his earlier work, was able to move beyond the problem of establishing the existence and importance of the textual structures in historical works, engaging in a broader consideration of how the existence of narratives in historical texts could be understood to function in relation to the structures of society. Although his precise position varied from essay to essay, White generally tended to argue that “The fact that narrative is a mode of discourse common to both ‘historical’ and ‘non-historical’ cultures and that it predominates in both mythic and fictional discourse makes it suspect as a manner of speaking about ‘real’ events. The non-narrative manner of speaking common to the physical sciences seems more appropriate for the representation of ‘real’ events.” 183 Because some sort of narrativizing must be employed in order to provide a meaningful structure for the otherwise chaotic jumble of reality, White argues that rather than being purely confined to history or Western culture, “Narrative is a meta-code, a human universal on the basis of which trans-cultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted.” 184 However, by expanding the reach of the kinds of narratives that he considers, White argues that it is possible to see a number of different types of narrativizing activities. Western historical narrative, in which the narrator is effaced and the narrated events are given the illusion of speaking for themselves, is a particularly problematic example of a larger category. “Real events should not speak, should not tell themselves. Real events should simply be; they can perfectly well

184 White, Content of the form, 1.
serve as the referents of a discourse, can be spoken about, but they should not pose as the subjects of narrative.\(^{185}\) Identifying this as the defining quality of Western narratives, White can then expand on his critique of the political functions of historical writing. Basing his analysis on Hegel’s claim about the ties between the growth of the nation and of historical narrative, White argues that it is possible to see the Western historical consciousness, in which events and objects have their own implicit meanings, as deeply connected to the cultural functions required to create the modern state. “Interest in the social system, which is nothing other than a system of human relationships governed by law, creates the possibility of conceiving of the kinds of tensions, conflicts, struggles, and their various kinds of resolutions that we are accustomed to find in any representation of reality presenting itself to us as history.\(^{186}\)” Ultimately, our understanding of a world that functions according to the structure of narrative can be understood as resulting from the ways in which our culturally-mediated sense of reality have been irrevocably altered by our political and social history.

In the article “The Politics of Historical Interpretation,” White builds even further on this claim, arguing that a definite body of power-operations (and therefore a connection to political ideology) can be seen in all interpretive actions, even those that are ostensibly far from politics.\(^{187}\) Within the boundaries of the large-scale historical forces connected to the rise of the Western historical consciousness\(^{188}\), the specific form assumed by the historical discipline is tied to a range of political

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\(^{185}\) White, *Content of the form*, 3.

\(^{186}\) White, *Content of the form* 14.

\(^{187}\) White, *Content of the form* 63-43.

\(^{188}\) And thus within this general structure of consciousness.
positions, positions that it supports by means of the interpretive procedures that make up its methodology. “The problem lies… with a conception of historical studies that purports to be above politics and at the same time rules out as unrealistic any political program or thought in the least tinged with utopianism. And it does so, moreover, by so disciplining historical consciousness so as to make realism effectively identical with anti-utopianism.” One can see the connection between the self-telling (because implicitly meaningful) style of narration that White believes defines Western history, and the repression of the political in traditional historiography. In both, meaningful stories told about the world can be described only as sort of manipulation, a distortion that can all too readily serve as a tool for political repression. “The historical narrative…reveals to us a world that is putatively ‘finished,’ done with, over, and yet not dissolved, not falling apart. In this world, reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience.” In the face of this falsely given fullness, White argues that it is necessary for individuals to knowingly construct their own reality, thereby allowing the possibility of a radically new power structure in which groups (or individuals) can take authorship over their own narrativized reality. “One can produce an imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less ‘true’ for being imaginary…this same is true with respect to narrative representations of reality, especially when, as in historical discourses, these representations are of the ‘human past.’ How else can any past, which by definition comprises events, processes, structures, and so forth, considered to be no longer perceivable, be represented in

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189 White, *Content of the form* 63.
190 White, *Content of the form* 21.
either consciousness or discourse except in an imaginary way?\textsuperscript{191} This is essentially White’s final word on the philosophy of history. Although he has adopted a focus on narrativism, his basic position on the relationship between the past and the present is almost precisely the same as it was in \textit{Metahistory}. Because meaning does not adhere in the past, and because the types of discourse that we use to represent this past are necessary to provide this meaning, the success or failure of a piece of historical writing can only be determined based on its relationship to the present, and the set of political and ethical concerns that emerge from this relationship. Indeed, in this later work, political questions move to the forefront, dominating the focus of his essays. Yet, as has been noted before, White’s argument has a number of significant problems, most notably his refusal to grant any importance to the deep reality that people experience in their relationship to the past. His philosophical system is overly deterministic, fluctuating between language and politics as the basis of the reality in the historical account, but never considering the unique type of validity that these accounts might have in and of themselves. Although he posits the possibility of a “utopian” freedom in opposition to these systems of control, the promise of totally autonomous self-creation, of the ability to remake the past to suit the present, feels flat and false. In essence, he had taken his own essential insight too far. While White revolutionized the philosophy of history by recognizing that the textual/tropic structure of an historical account was fundamental and inextricable from its meaning, his work never moved beyond this, coming to argue that this structure represented the entirety of its meaning. Although White’s work brilliantly analyzes the structures at

\textsuperscript{191}White, \textit{Content of the form} 57.
play within history, his conceptualization of the human relationship to the past is falsely reductive, failing to recognize that description of an historical narrative in terms of its political or ethical implications does not suffice to explain its affective power.

In addition to the work done by White, the discourse around historical narrative also produced the first significant alternative to the linguistic branch of the philosophy of history through the development of what could be termed “the phenomenology of history.” Although it had links to certain brands of analytical philosophy (Frederick A. Olafson) and continental/hermeneutic philosophy (Paul Ricoeur), the foremost proponent of this position who wrote firmly within the tradition of the philosophy of history was David Carr. In his work, Carr aimed to refute the positions assumed by the Narrativist/Structuralist philosophers of history by arguing that the entire basis of their investigation was faulty because, in its focus on the functioning of the historical profession, it failed to take into account the underlying existential reasons for the human relationship with the past. “Historians are assumed to enter the scene, existing of course in the present, and equipped with all the aims, interests, and skills of their profession.” However, by considering the problem of historical knowledge from this starting point, the philosophy of history has made a grave error, failing to recognize that the development of the historical profession is only made possible because “we have a connection, as ordinary persons,

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prior to and independently of the historical-cognitive interest.\textsuperscript{194} Based on the existence of the awareness and meaning of the past in everyday life, Carr attempts to reject the disjunction posited between the historical text and the actual past by demonstrating how “the professional practice of history is grounded in the irreducibly temporal character of human existence.”\textsuperscript{195}

Carr’s approach is based on his rejection of one of the principal lynchpins of White’s structure, namely his claim that historical narratives must be the creation of the historian in the present because the past itself cannot itself have a narrative structure\textsuperscript{196}. Instead, Carr argues that the beginning-middle-end structure that makes up the basic form of a narrative does indeed inhere to lived reality, and in fact is a fundamental aspect of the basic human perception of time, present in any action undertaken or plan embarked on. “The events of life are anything but a mere sequence; they constitute rather a complex structure of temporal configurations that interlock and receive their definition and their meaning from within action itself…Things do not always work out as planned, but this only adds an element of the same contingency and suspense to life that we find in stories. It hardly justifies claiming that action is a chaos of unrelated items.”\textsuperscript{197} Moreover, Carr argues that human consciousness is itself an important influence on this narrative quality.

\textsuperscript{194} Carr, \textit{Time, Narrative, and History}, 3.
\textsuperscript{195} Noel Carroll, review 297.
\textsuperscript{196} A claim that Carr believes is exemplified by Louis Mink’s statement that “Stories are not lived but told.” David Carr, “The Reality of History”, in Jorn Rusen, ed. \textit{Meaning and Representation in History}. New York: Berghahn, 2006, 125.
constantly shaping and reshaping the understanding of the past, and therefore of the expectations for the future, in order to bring the account into line with events. Carr relates this to Husserl’s (and Augustine’s) idea of the elongation of consciousness within the present, in which we are never “merely” in the moment because the very basic conditions for making a moment meaningful requires a constant reference both forward and backwards in time, and in doing so creates an ever-present narrative that defines our experience of the world. “The deepest and most significant structures we find in narrative—beginning/middle/end, problem (or crisis)/solution, suspension/resolution, reversal of fortune, and so on—are structures that characterize our very existence as human beings. This is not just the way we tell about our lives after the fact; this is how we live them from the very start.” This is a powerful argument, and it significantly challenges the structuralist claim for the removal of narrative elements from the writing of history because of their ideological or unscientific nature. However, it does not necessarily do a great deal against those who embraced White’s basic view of narrative; according to this account, narrative cannot be removed from history because it represents the basic structuring element present in all written work. Furthermore, White would not necessarily argue against the importance of narrative for creating meaning in the life of an individual. Instead, his argument had always been based on the fact that creating a narrative account of the past was a form-giving act, and thereby one that added meaning to the

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200 “It is not possible that the question of narrative in any discussion of historical theory is always finally about the function of imagination in the production of a specifically human truth?” White, Content of the Form, 57
past that was not present there to begin with. This is not a claim that narratives do not have deep human significance or that they are incapable of providing such significance. Rather, as has previously been discussed, White (and many other post-structuralist theorists) believed that the type of meaning provided by narrative closure presented a moral problem, robbing humans of the “dignity and freedom” that they could claim only through creation of their own meaning through a “reaction-formation to an apperception of history’s meaninglessness.”

Therefore, in order to recuperate the place of historical narrative, Carr needed to establish not only the existence of narrative within everyday human existence, but also to demonstrate that it was possible to validly move from these individual narratives to the large-scale narrative accounts written by historians in such a way that a definite continuity between the two was firmly established. In order to do this, Carr argued that in addition to personal subjectivity, individuals who live within a community become part of a larger group subject, one that shares some of the features of individual subjectivity. “What strikes me about social life is the extent to which an individual takes part in experiences and engages in actions whose proper subject is not the individual himself or herself but that of the group…these are experiences and actions usually not properly attributable to me alone, or to me, you and the others individually. They belong rather to us: it is not my experience but ours, not I who act but we who act in concert.” Although this group subject’s experience of time is radically different than that of an individual, it does actually exist in the lived experience of the community, specifically through the experience/memory of

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201 White, *Content of the Form*. 72.

the events and challenges that affected the community as a whole. This form of cultural/communal experience, like individual experience, is structured in the form of a narrative, and as a result, Carr argues that the events that it encompasses are also understood through the narrative that the community tells itself. Using World War II as an example, Carr argues that although “The individual experience of this phenomenon is connected with other personal experiences, such as maturing, getting an education, or choosing a career... one can distinguish an individual’s part in such an action from the action itself, and it is the latter, as our action when we are faced with a common situation, that belongs in the life of the community.”

Although this argument touches on a number of valuable points in its description of the experience of history within a community, it fails to achieve its goal of refuting the textual arguments of the linguistic turn for a number of reasons. For one, as Noel Carroll points out in his review of “Time, Narrative and History,” although Carr may have established the importance of narratives within individual and (perhaps even) communal life, “Historians construct narratives about these agents rather than reconstruct the very narratives of these agents…[therefore] the narratives that historians tell need not, as a matter of principle, reflect or otherwise correspond to the narratives that operate in the lives of historical agents.” When this problem is moved to the level of the historical study of communal events (or to the long duree of the Annales), this issue becomes even more pressing. Yet, although he failed to

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203 “It is sequence of such strictly communal events that figures in the narrative account of the existence of the group to which the individual member subscribes as a function of his or her membership.” (Carr, *Time, Narrative and History*, 166.)
204 Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, 166.
205 Carroll, review, 305.
achieve his goals, Carr’s work also marks an important point in the evolution of the philosophy of history. Unlike the increasingly conservative rearguard of traditional historical writing, which continued to argue for the ability of narrative historical writing to produce realistic accounts able to come “close-enough” to the “real truth” by means of methodology and the goal of objectivity, Carr counted himself as fully within the Narrativist camp, claiming that his work should “provide a response to…critic’s objections.” Thus, although he rejects many of the implications of the linguistic turn, he functions firmly within its field, accepting the basic description of the historical act that it has created. Therefore, although it is possible to link his ideas with those of the Collingwoodian philosophers of history who believed that one could gain objective knowledge of the past through its experiential recreation, his acceptance of the issues of language make such a direct connection impossible.

In many ways, Carr’s efforts were mirrored by a set of discourses that, having developed outside of the philosophy of history, would come to have a major impact on its development during the 1990’s. Assuming a number of forms, these discourses can be grouped by their shared attempt to conceptualize the relationship between the past and the present in ways that privileged the experience of the history over the processes by which Western society has attempted to gain a rational knowledge of it. Because of its focus on bypassing the mediating function of the written text, this general trend can at least partially be understood as a reaction to the effect of the

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207 Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, 11.
distancing and immateriality produced by the linguistic turn within the humanities\textsuperscript{208}.

Rapidly increasing in importance during the philosophical dominance of the Narrativist philosophy of history, these discourses served to exemplify the extent to which this philosophy had been unable to describe the presence of the past in a way that fully explained its continued power.

In relation to history, the most prominent of these discourses were built around the concepts of public memory and trauma. In large part based on the rediscovered theoretical work of Maurice Halbwachs, the investigation of public memory saw it as fundamentally contrary to history. “Memory evokes the presence of the past; history keeps its distance.”\textsuperscript{209} Because of this aspect of presence, memory is tied to specific places and to certain types of commemorative cultural activities, and as a result, it can be shaped and altered in relation to the changing context of the present.\textsuperscript{210} In many ways, the archetypal study of memory is “Les Lieux de Mémoire.” Undertaken by the French historian Pierre Nora between 1984-1992, this group project attempted to trace the networks of locations by which the cultural memory of France was created and preserved.\textsuperscript{211} While projects like this brought the subject of memory into the mainstream of historical thought, its importance was fully solidified through its relationship to the discourse of the Holocaust. While avoiding going too far into this obviously complex issue, theorists of memory and trauma have argued that the Holocaust presented the paradigmatic example of an event that could not be

\textsuperscript{209} Hutton, Patrick. “Recent Scholarship on Memory and History.” \textit{The History Teacher}, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2000), 538.
\textsuperscript{210} Hutton, “Recent Scholarship on Memory and History,” 537.
\textsuperscript{211} Ibid.
adequately represented by conventional historical means, precisely because its reality could not be appropriately grasped through the narrative closure utilized by historians.212

The question of the Holocaust also raised the issue of trauma in history. Utilizing a primarily psychoanalytic theoretical basis, many historians and cultural theorists argued that the effects of the Holocaust were so intense as to render large sections of Europe (specifically Germans and Jews) unable to process it emotionally or intellectually. As a result, the historical accounts that had been written about it (at least those written soon after the fact) were stymied by the forces of psychological repression, or transformed the expression of the anguish caused by the event into apparently unconnected actions. While it is not obvious whether these effects will ever truly abate, it seemed clear that it was possible for historical events to carry enough cultural and emotional weight to negatively effect the ability of historians to work with them. As can be seen through these examples, these emerging fields of study were primarily concerned with the past as it exists outside of the bounds of historical writing. Thus, while they represent an important theoretical development in the humanities, they fall outside of the bounds of an account that is focused on the philosophy of history. Yet although these discourses will not be considered there, it is important to note the theoretical impact created by their investigation of the non-textual historical experience.

If one takes the (almost) total textual relativism of White’s conception of historical narrative as one pole of the philosophy of history, and the experiential

reality of history described by Carr and the discourses of memory and trauma as the other, the developments within the philosophy of history from the mid 1990’s until the present day can be understood as functioning in a direct response to the knowledge of the gap between the two. With the possible exception of a few lingering realists, all significant new projects are either engaged in the attempt to bridge the divide between the text and the felt/understood reality of the past through the creation of a new system of description, or they are content to function within the tensions that this gap sets out. Regardless of which option is chosen, the basic paradigm of the field seems to have been essentially settled. Moving away from the intense battles and sweeping claims that have characterized the last twenty odd years of academic life, the philosophy of history has entered a new phase, in which it seems that the general trend has been towards a taking of stock, and a gradually reconsideration of the relevance and worth of the developments that had occurred in such rapid succession during the height of the linguistic turn. 213 As described by Frank Ankersmit, “The Golden Age of theory, when exciting and provocative theories were fired off in breathtaking tempo and hotly discussed by everyone, has been succeeded by the Silver Age of modesty and of the solid practice of the craft of history. 214 Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the major trends that can be seen in this period of theoretical moderation has been the return of a stylistic approach to the philosophy of history that

213 “As I understand the post-postmodern moment among those who embraced postmodernism when it came into being, the task is to evaluate what is still with us, what has to be packed every time we set out to unpack a text, [and]what has really been discarded…What my personal stock-taking reveals is that a lot of stock from the linguistic turn reached its shelf date surprisingly soon…” Partner, “Narrative Persistence,” 85.
214 Ankersmit, Historical Representation, 2.
is remarkably similar to that of the 1960’s. Moving away from the constant invocation of theorists from other disciplines, the philosophy of history has regained much of its old trait of self-referentiality, with the result that one can see an increased continuity in the new work that appears within the field. In this, it is also possible to recognize the signs of a more significant change in the values that govern the field as a whole. Whereas it previously seemed possible to imagine a breakthrough capable of “solving” the problem of history, the experience of endlessly contradictory theoretical movement has blunted that hope. Thus, rather than attempting to produce a radical breakthrough, scholars appear more inclined to work at transforming and integrating the positions taken by their predecessors through careful criticism and questioning, aiming to build a body of useful or workable theory rather then one that holds the “truth” of the situation.\footnote{For examples of this type of work, see Chris Lorenz. “Historical Knowledge and Historical Reality: A Plea for “Internal Realism.” \textit{History and Theory}, Vol. 33, No. 3 (1994): 297-327, Jurgen Pieters, “New Historicism: Postmodern Historiography between Narrativism and Heterology.” \textit{History and Theory}, Vol. 39, No.1 (2000): 21-38, or Steven G Crowell, “Mixed Messages: The Heterogeneity of Historical Discourse.” \textit{History and Theory}, Vol. 37, No. 2 (1998) 220-44.}

In many ways, the figure that best exemplifies these developments is Frank Ankersmit. Coming from a background in philosophy and science, Ankersmit’s first book on the philosophy of history, “Narrative Logic,” was published in 1983. Since then, he has worked to gradually expand the reach of his theoretical position, adapting his explanatory mechanism in order to deal with new developments within the philosophy of history as they emerge.\footnote{“One of the pleasant things of the book [narrative logic] was that it permitted me to deduce almost mechanically a position on the many topics that are discussed in}
philosophy is quite deep, and many of the issues in his work go far beyond the scope of the problematic that is being discussed here. Although most of his writing concerns the philosophy of history, he considers it to be a desperately under-examined aspect of the larger philosophy of language, and as result, he frequently engages in far larger philosophical investigations by using the historical text as a launching pad\textsuperscript{217}.

In the aspects of his work that apply most directly to the philosophy of history as it is being considered here, Ankersmit fully accepts White’s argument that an historical account is a first and foremost a narrative text, and that it functions (and therefore must be considered) according to a linguistic and tropic structure. Unlike White, who considers texts to be sets of descriptions of the past organized by a narrative, Ankersmit argues that is more useful to conceive of an historical account as made of a “narrative substance,” which he defines as the “set of statements that together embody the representation of the past that is proposed in the historical narrative in question.”\textsuperscript{218} In many ways similar to Dray’s argument that it is necessary to follow an historical narrative in order to grasp it, the narrative substance of an historical account exists as a totality, and therefore is not merely the sum of its explanatory claims. “A historical narrative is a historical narrative only insofar as the (metaphorical) meaning of the historical narrative in its totality transcends the (literal)


meaning of the sum of its individual statements. The important thing about a narrative substance is that, because it is not reducible to its individual components, it is therefore “of the nature of things; like things they can be spoken about without ever being part of the language in which they are mentioned. Language is used here with the purpose of constructing a narrative interpretation which itself lies outside the domain of language, though the interpretation is made out of language. The point of this is that the narrative substance created by the individual statements of the historical account is, despite being constructed out of language, a thing with the same ontological status as any other thing. While it is made out of a collection of signs, each of which can be taken to individually refer to the world, the narrative substance itself represents an addition to reality, with no counterpart in the world of the past. Thus, instead of the relationship of reference or description that is typically used when considering the accuracy of historical texts, Ankersmit argues that it is instead correct to use the concept of representation or “being about” to characterize the nature of this relationship. “Though both descriptions and representations stand in a relationship with reality, a description will be said to refer to reality (by means of its

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221 “Although language may be used for representing reality (as will typically be the case with the historical text), the opposition between the represented and its representation by no means coincides with the opposition between reality and language. Even more so if we think of works of art, of political representation, of representation in legal contexts, the represented and its representation will share the same ontological status. Both will belong to the world, both will unproblematically be a part of the inventory of reality.” (Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 81.)
subject-term), whereas a representation (as a whole) will be said to be about reality.\textsuperscript{222}"

Historical texts are complex precisely because they mix both types of relationships. The narrative substance itself is about reality, and therefore can be described as having a varying degree of descriptive utility while remaining fundamentally unfalsifiable\textsuperscript{223} while individual factual statements refer to reality, and can be falsified. Avoiding the dismissal of research that can be seen in many of the Narrativist philosophies of history, Ankersmit argues that the historical method is in and of itself a powerful tool for determining the truth of a description of the past. “If we worry about whether we should or should not believe a historical account, we should listen to the arguments that historians have for their views and not to epistemological speculation--and that is the end of it. Historical representation is an ‘instant epistemology,’ so to say: it does for individual historical problems what epistemology attempts to do for knowledge in general by means of its conceptual schemes.\textsuperscript{224}”

This would be simple enough except for the fact that, in the course of a discussion of the past, discourse will tend to slip between referring to things and referring to the metaphors or language used to talk about things.\textsuperscript{225} Given the

\textsuperscript{222} Ankersmit, \textit{Historical Representation}, 41.
\textsuperscript{223} “Logically narrative interpretations are of the nature of proposals (to see the past from a certain point of view)...proposals may be useful, fruitful, or not, but cannot be either true or false. The same can be said of historical narratives.” Ankersmit, \textit{History and Tropology}, 37.
\textsuperscript{224} Ankersmit, “Danto, History and the Tragedy of Human Existence,” 297.
\textsuperscript{225} Ankersmit connects this to Quine’s notion of “semantic ascent,” which he describes as “a discourse in which the level of ‘speaking’ and that of ‘speaking about’ begin to intermingle.” (Ankersmit, \textit{Historical Representation}, 41).
tendency (and perhaps need) of human culture to fix certain metaphors or representations to the point that they assume a definite connection to reality, a single term can function as both a thing and a descriptive concept within the same general historical debate. To use Ankersmit’s example, one can discuss “the Renaissance” as clearly and inter-subjectively agreed upon term with a fixed definition, in which case statements can be made about it that are either true or false. On the other hand, an historical account can also deal with the term in a critical sense, challenging or altering its meaning through an alternate representation of the period or by proposing a redefinition of the word. In this case, the word-object “Renaissance” would lose its given-ness and become referentially unfixed from the past. It is possible to consider the concepts of history as constantly fluctuating between these two types of relationship depending on the context of their usage and the state of the historiographic discussion. “It is precisely in this fusion of ‘speaking’ and ‘speaking about’ where historical understanding and historical debate should be located. For on the one hand the historical text contains the level of ‘speaking’ (i.e., the level where the historian describes the past in terms of individual statements about historical events, states of affairs, causal links, etc.). But on the other it also comprises the level where the discussion takes place about what chunk of language

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226 “If a narrative interpretation goes unquestioned for a long time, is accepted by everybody, and becomes part of ordinary language (thereby loses its historiographical nature), it may turn into the notion of a (type of) thing. A narrative thing has become a thing in reality. This is how our concepts of types of things originate. Typification procedures decide what is still merely interpretative and what is real; there is nothing fixed and absolute about the demarcation between what is interpretation and what belongs to the inventory of reality.” (Ankersmit, Tropology, 39)
(i.e. what historical text) represents best or corresponds best to some chunk of past reality.227"

This marks a fundamental change in the conceptualization of the historical text.

Eliminating the need to address the problems of epistemology that had been raised by the narrative/linguistic philosophy of history, Ankersmit’s turn to representation also removed the threat of narrative incommensurability (and therefore of relativism) that had been the major problem with these approaches. By basing the validity of historiographic debate in the nature of language, Ankersmit reestablishes a philosophical basis for the cognitively responsible practice of history, as well as for the cumulative benefits of the continuing engagement with this practice. Because historical understanding is generated by the insight into the nature of the past provided by the representations of it contained in historical accounts, such an understanding can only be strengthened by the exposure to many such accounts, all of which will offer (if they are useful) alternate ways to view the past.

“Historical insight, therefore, is only born in the space between rival narrative interpretations and cannot be identified with any specific (set of) interpretations.228“ Because these historical interpretations function according to the logic of representation, Ankersmit’s theory retains the focus on the aesthetic aspect of historical work that was in many ways the most valuable result of the work of Kellner, Bann, and (to a lesser extent) White. “Representation is a primarily aesthetic term. The work of art is the prototypical representation. So, in a sense, there is much

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227 Ankersmit, *Historical representation*, 42.
228 Ankersmit, *Tropology*, 41.
truth in the claim that has been reiterated all through the centuries that historical writing is an art rather than a science.\textsuperscript{229}

Considered as a whole, Ankersmit’s theory seems to fulfill the vast majority of its goals. Through his careful application of the analytical philosophy of language, he manages to connect “standard” historical practice with self-conscious constructivism of the linguistic turn in a way that incorporates the fundamental insights of both. In doing so, he avoids the “Scylla and Charybdis of empiricism and Derridian Deconstructivism,” an effort that he frames as an attempt to ameliorate historical theory’s “stubborn penchant for extremism.” While it is possible to criticize various aspects of Ankersmit’s project, it seems far more difficult to argue against its overarching goal, its rhetoric of reconciliation. Having experienced the extremes of the linguistic turn and the intensity of its rapid development, the philosophy of history has grown self-conscious. Like history itself, it has gradually begun to consider its own history, and therefore becomes better able to evaluate the nature of its own claims. Far from radical relativity, Ankersmit’s work seems to evince a humble post-modernity; his work demonstrates a willingness to change, to avoid absolute claims, to recognize that the overarching discussion of the philosophy of history is more useful than its individual participants, and that there is therefore ample room for contradiction within its boundaries.

Such an understanding of the possibilities present within the philosophy of history is a far cry from the type of approach that dominated the discipline’s earliest years (when the Hempelians were ascendant), or its rapid growth during the linguistic

\textsuperscript{229} Ankersmit, \textit{Historical representation}, 284.
\textsuperscript{230} Ankersmit, \textit{Historical representation}, 48.
During both of those periods, the philosophy of history functioned from a position of power, attempting to force historians to accept its definition of their practice. Instead of such bluster, the approach taken by Ankersmit represents an alternate aspect of the philosophy of history. Exemplified in earlier periods by the work of figures like Hans Kellner and Louis Mink, this approach has always seemed more interested in the exploration of history than in the attempt to force it to conform to a definite identity. Such a practice allows that history may very well not be a cohesive practice, or admit of a single logical structure capable of describing its function. In so doing, it allows the philosophy of history freedom from the burden of explanation, and enables it to explore the possibility of a fundamentally new role for the future.
Conclusion - The Philosophy of The History of The Philosophy of History

As I argued in the last chapter, the current state of the philosophy of history marks a substantively new point in its development. Resulting from the theoretical exhaustion that followed the over-indulgences of the linguistic turn, this position is characterized by an increased self-consciousness of the partial nature of the descriptions provided by any representations, whether theoretical or historical, and an accompanying scaling back of the type of claims and goals set by the those engaged with the field. As can be seen in my analysis of the work of Frank Ankersmit, this approach aims to provide a workable solution to the problems posed by history, avoiding the radicalism of the past as best as possible. Thus, certain theoretical paths, particularly that of Derridean deconstruction, are to be avoided not because they are incorrect, but because they simply are not seen as useful for the task at hand. This conception of the philosophy of history reflects a deep-set shift in the self-understanding of the field as a whole, suggesting an increased awareness of the rhetorical (and therefore multi-logical) nature of the work that functions within it, and an accompanying reassessment of how such work should best be constructed. Viewed from another angle, it is possible to see all of this as a result of the historicizing of the philosophy of history itself, an ironic response to the otherwise disastrous implications of the theoretical fissures produced by the linguistic turn. I believe that this developing sensibility creates both the possibility and the need for the introduction of greater theoretical and practical self-reflection into the philosophy of
history at a disciplinary level. Such self-reflection may allow the fruitful investigation of a number questions that I believe the philosophy of history sorely needs to consider if it is to continue to be a productive field of study.

In many ways, the situation in which the philosophy of history currently finds itself can be traced to the effects of its own achievements over the past half-century. Since its modern inauguration during the 1940’s, the philosophy of history has been engaged in a systematic exposure of the structures underlying the practice(s) of history within the modern Western academy. While this initially began with a rejection of the scientific pretensions of the Hempelians, in the context of the narrative philosophy of history, it escalated to the investigation of the literary and poetic structures on which all historical texts were constructed. As described in the last chapter, this focus on language enabled the interdisciplinary investigations of the linguistic turn, which not only delved further into the aesthetic structures of the historical text, but also utilized a literarily empowered historiography to critically examine the processes of cultural development and conscious disciplinization that created the forms of modern historical writing and research. Moreover, concurrent developments in anthropology and cultural history argued that, far from being a necessary or “advanced” stage in the development of mankind, the understanding of history and the relationship to the past that can be found in the modern West have developed as a result of long-term trends specific to that cultural system. Not only have investigations into the “historical consciousness” of other times (even within

231 Developments that were often integrated into the work of the philosophy of history. Hayden White in particular frequently invoked the work of Levi-Strauss in support of his own arguments.
Western civilization) and places revealed the extent to which these relationships are subject to change, but the influential discourses around post-modernity and memory have argued that such changes have already occurred within the present day as a result of the pressures of modernity. All of these influences, many of which worked in conjunction with the substantive theoretical changes occurring within the discipline of history as a result of the linguistic turn, have caused it to lose its sense of being an unproblematically natural set of operations, and historians have increasingly come to accept an understanding of their practice that emphasizes its origin in the specific history of its development over time.

This change in the conception of history raises a number of vital questions for the philosophy of history, challenging the basic foundation on which it has established its inquiry. If history can no longer be understood as consisting of a fixed and non-contingent category of human activity, how can the philosophy of history understand its own practice, or conceive of its goals? The philosophy of history has taken almost no steps to answer these problems because, despite the extent to which those working within the field have critically engaged with its theoretical productions, there has been a general failure to critically consider either the position that it holds as a discipline, or the nature of the investigation in which it is engaged. As a result, despite the fact that the dominant figures of the field have come to agree on the historically contingent nature of the historical discipline, the philosophy of history itself still functions in a manner based on many of the assumptions present when it first began as a serious academic discipline.
In many ways, the lack of such an investigation can be explained by the precarious academic position to which the philosophy of history has long been consigned. As is well known, history itself has always held a somewhat questionable place within the academy. Despite the efforts of those dedicated to the methodology of archival research and the “objectivity” provided by professional training, the failure to produce a conclusive “answer” for the questions of the past, and the literary elements visible within its production have meant that history is continually caught in the division of knowledge that separates the arts from the sciences. As a result of this, historians have traditionally considered the philosophy of history with nothing short of contempt, viewing it as overly theoretical and entirely ignorant of the challenges and concerns of actual “working” historians. In addition, its assumption that history required theoretical validation was understood as a veiled criticism of a method that most historians believed was in need of no external justification. Given this attitude from the subjects of their investigation, in addition to the problematic status of history within the academy overall, the refusal of philosophers of history to investigate the practicing of their own field comes to make more sense. Given their already precarious position, it stands to reason that the philosophy of history would remain focused on establishing its interpretive authority instead of engaging in a potentially unsettling self-critique.

However, the increased theoretical awareness that has developed within history has made these questions more pressing. As a result of the linguistic turn, many of those who work within history have begun to question the presuppositions and structures by which their inquiries have been constituted, actively incorporating a
self-conscious consideration of their practice into their work. From a certain view, this development could easily mark the end of a need for the philosophy of history. According to such an analysis, the philosophy of history would be understood as having developed in order to investigate unexamined issues concerning the nature of history. Because historians are now actively engaged in questions concerning the nature of their practice, the purpose for which the philosophy of history initially developed has been filled. Given the continued work done within the philosophy of history, such a conclusion clearly does not hold. Yet despite this, it does raise a number of interesting issues. It is true that there are now a larger number of historians who actively engage in the theory of history, and beyond those with such a direct theoretical focus, the work of the discipline as a whole has definitely developed an increased self-awareness.

It is, however, still possible to see a clear difference between the philosophy of history, and the development of what might be called the theory of history. As I argued in the previous chapter, I believe that this difference can plainly be seen in the nature of the work itself. If this is true, it means that the investigations of the philosophy of history and those of historical theory produce different (although related) types of knowledge, and that the philosophy of history is engaged in a

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232 This difference is not merely one of degree. If a piece of history is highly theoretical, it does not mean that it “graduates” to the philosophy of history. This is does not mean that a single work or a single writer cannot function within both of these discourses. However, such authors are rare, and usually fail to fully balance both sides of their investigation. In many ways the paradigmatic example of this type of figure is Foucault. Although his works can both be considered philosophy and history, his historical methodology (and therefore the purely historical use of his work) seems to have suffered from his focus on the philosophical aspects of his thought.
fundamentally different inquiry than history. According to the original understanding of the relationship between the two fields, describing the differences between these related projects would be simple. Historical theory, situated within the bounds of history, analyses the particular functioning and meaning of historical investigation. Philosophy, situated outside these bounds, attempts to discern the structures of knowledge that allow history to function, and attempts to discern whether the actuality of historical practices matches these conclusions.\textsuperscript{233}

The changed understanding of the discipline of history makes such a description unacceptable. If the nature of history is itself subject to historical change, this means that it can no longer be understood to have an essential identity of the type that the philosophy of history was previously trying to discern. As a result, a number of new considerations must be taken into account. For one, the understanding of the relationship that exists between the two disciplines must be put on an entirely different footing. If the identity of history can undergo significant changes, than the philosophy of history must also undergo similar type of change. Instead of being connected to a fixed point, the philosophy of history is paired with a moving partner.

\textsuperscript{233} In many ways, this division can be seen to correspond to the old categories of the “substantive” and “analytical/critical” philosophy of history. As has been argued by Hayden White, there is a clear connection between the “Substantive” philosophy of history and history proper. While the classification of Hegel in this category may leave something to be desired, White’s argument describes the spectrum of theoretical engagement within modern history quite well. It might therefore be useful to change his argument, and state that all histories presuppose both a theory and a philosophy of history. In this case, theory has been expanded beyond methodology to include all of the aspects that are related to the meaning of history, while philosophy attempts to discern the more large-scale structures of knowledge that enable history to function. Given that this latter consideration is also subject to the developments of history (albeit at a far slower pace), the difference between them is, at a certain point, one of degree.
This means that the philosophy of history is forced to abandon an “objective” understanding of its process of description and analysis. If history is constantly in a state of development, than the conclusions to which the philosophy of history comes must be understood as being able to change the nature of the field of history, at least to the extent that the philosophy of history has any academic/intellectual connections to its object. As a result, the philosophy of history must abandon its understanding as being a consequence-free investigation. By advocating one aspect or another of the functioning of history in its descriptions, it has the ability to shift how those within the field consider their practice, and therefore can make a major difference on the path taken by the field in its continued development. Taken to its fullest extent, this new understanding unfixes the philosophy of history in a rather remarkable way. Rather than being tied to the description of an object with a definite identity, the philosophy of history is suddenly free to create an understanding of how history might be. As the discipline is currently constituted, this aspect can only be apprehended when one views the nature of its practice from outside of its discourse, and over an extended period of time. Yet according to the conclusions that the field itself has come to, this creative possibility must be present.

It may be said that “creative” is an incorrect word to describe the transformative impact that the philosophy of history has on history. Rather, the two

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234 To a certain extent, this was acknowledged in the work of Hayden White, especially in his article “The Politics of the Contemporary Philosophy of History.” Although he clearly hoped to make any impact, White argued that he was merely revealing how history “actually” functioned in order to make historians account for the types of value-based decisions they were already making. Therefore, although White openly admitted that he aimed to change the practice of historians and therefore the functioning of history, he never went so far as to consider that he was changing its very nature through his effect on its discursive field.
disciplines can be understood to function in a reciprocal relationship; changes within one are considered by the other, which results in further changes, and so on. This may also be true, but I fail to see how such an admission would substantively alter my argument. The point is that the philosophy of history functions in a significantly different way than has been recognized, and that this raises a number of fundamental issues concerning the nature of the discipline. For my part, I will deal with what I see as the two most pressing questions that emerge from this: what type of knowledge does the philosophy of history produce, and what is the purpose of its investigation?

These two questions are more closely related than one would initially think. Once it has been accepted that the philosophy of history is not engaged in an investigation of something with an absolute (platonic) identity, than the knowledge that it produces must be understood as fundamentally “local,” its ability to be “true”/useful a result of its relation to a specific discursive context rather than through a connection to any transcendental meaning. As a result, decisions made about what the philosophy of history is attempting to accomplish will affect the type of knowledge that it produces. In all of this, it is important to note that by arguing that both history and the philosophy of history lack a concrete identity, I am not claiming that it is therefore possible to change their nature or functioning easily. Individuals and institutions believe in the reality of the meanings by which they order their lives, even if they understand that these meanings can shift significantly over a period of

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235 I mean this in the sense that it is impossible to characterize any particular set of historical practices as constituting or being the definitive or true “history”. Any such definition must necessarily be partial, and therefore specific to the context in which it is made.

236 The opposite of this holds true as well.
time. The same holds true for academic disciplines. Thus, I do not believe that it is possible to utterly transform the nature of the philosophy of history. Instead, given the situation in which the philosophy of history currently finds itself, I believe that it is important for the discipline to engage in a serious consideration of what it believes its role to be in relation to both history and the broader humanities, and what such a definition would alter about the meaning/purpose of its investigations.

From my study of the past seventy years of the philosophy of history, I have found it possible to identify two general modes of thought about the nature of the discipline and purpose of its investigation. Although both of these conceptions offer certain useful features, given the conditions that currently characterize the field, neither fully retains its validity. In their place, I will suggest a third option that, by stressing the self-sufficiency and self-determination that I consider the discipline to possess, suggests how it might be able to formulate a self-reflexive understanding of its own nature that would better enable it to meet the challenges of its evolving position.

The first of these modes considers the primary purpose of the philosophy of history to be the investigation of the cognitive puzzle posed by historical practice. Prevalent in the early analytic philosophy of history, and tied to its revival in the wake of the linguistic turn, this approach attempts to analyze the functioning of history in order to produce “pure” knowledge, that is, to expand and test the functioning of systems of thought and inquiry by using them to uncover the structure of history. According to this approach, the philosophy of history is able to generate knowledge concerning the structures of human understanding, whether this structure
is seen as being based on logic (Danto) or the nature of language itself (Ankersmit).

As a result, the nature of history matters little to this approach besides the unique logical challenges posed by its evidently successful functioning. Instead of taking history as a complex and meaningful aspect of human society that should be understood because of its innate value, it was considered purely as the object of an investigation, to be analyzed instead of meaningfully grasped. Because of this, the tendency within this approach is to consider the thought/insight produced by the investigation of the nature of history as product to be valued independently of its actual applicability to history as it is practiced, therefore emphasizing the relative independence of its inquiry from the actual status of the discipline of history. As a result of this understanding, those who worked in this mode tended conceive of very little necessary connection between the two fields, and saw the philosophy of history as holding little or no responsibility or advisory role to the discipline of history itself.

In almost the opposite fashion, philosophy of history’s other primary mode privileged its relationship with the discipline of history. Instead of developing an analysis for the pure cognitive/philosophical benefit that such an investigation was capable of generating, this approach understood the philosophy of history to hold a vital explanatory role. By using its intellectual tools to analyze the “true” structures of history, the philosophy of history was able to inform historians of the nature of their own practice, a project that was seen as particularly necessary because of the numerous threats facing the discipline from within the academy. Such an explanation could either take the form of a description of the functional structures of history (as in the work of Hayden White) or by attempting to justify the specific nature of historical
knowledge (as was the case for Louis Mink). Rather than focusing on the possibility of generating philosophically useful knowledge, this approach was based on a belief in the importance of the practice of history in and of itself. Because the philosophy of history was understood as a tool that could enable a better understanding of history, the knowledge that it produced was seen as being inextricably linked to the discipline, and its value considered secondary in comparison to its possible utility for the human project of historical understanding.

In the wake of the changed understanding of discourse and rhetoric that have been produced by recent developments within the academy, neither of these approaches remains capable of explaining the nature of the philosophy of history, precisely because neither takes into account the positioned/contextual nature of its inquiry. Given the constantly changing nature of both what might be counted as a “true” description of history, and of the disciplinary mechanisms that create the field in which such a truth is formulated, any philosophy that attempts to grasp a truth capable of transcending its specific position will necessarily perpetuate the endless cycle of theoretical claims that has lead to precisely the situation in which the philosophy of history currently finds itself. Given the recent history of theory, it is simply no longer feasible for a philosophy to rely on its innate interpretative authority in this fashion. There have simply been too many overthrown systems, and too many examples of vast descriptive over-reach for this kind of behavior to be tolerated any longer. If the philosophy of history is going to continue to be a valid field of inquiry, it needs to find a way to change its functioning so as to avoid this in the future.
It appears to me that the best way to do this would be to take the approaches that the philosophy of history has used to analyze the functioning of history, and bring them to bear on itself. Instead of a neutral observation, the philosophy of history should be seen as a directed theoretical intervention, a representation of how one could understand the functioning of history that makes a transformative claim. Rather than resting its interpretive validity on an appeal to truth, the philosophy of history should be understood as functioning in relation to the field into which it is interjected, a field comprised of both the history that it takes as an object, and the other philosophical works with which it is in dialog. If it were understood in this way, the goals of the philosophy of history would need to change radically. As the field is currently constituted, its theories aim for a definite end, a point at which the problem of history could be solved by a “correct” description. If the constant and mutual change in both history and the philosophy of history are taken into full account, such a goal is revealed not only as impossible, but as the result of an utterly mistaken conceptualization of its practice. Just as history has come to be understood as a productive process despite its lack of a “final” version, its constant reinterpretation and argument coming to be seen as a necessary aspect of a society’s changing relationship with its own past, the philosophy of history should also be viewed as a process-driven (instead of goal oriented) practice.

This still leaves open the question of what such a practice would be able to produce. If the search for the truth of history is abandoned, to what kind of knowledge can the philosophy of history lay claim? I believe that to answer this question, it is necessary to return to the original self-conceptions of the discipline.
Although their transposition to the new discursive understanding involves a number of significant changes, many of the elements of their basic structure still hold true. Although the philosophy of history has convincingly argued that the current historical profession is the result of a number of specific developments, this has only altered, and not reduced, the importance of its place in our world. Through the investigation of the nature of history, scholars have discovered the extent to which it is deeply embedded in the basic structures of Western society, finding it implicated in many of the fundamental ways in which we come to know our world and understand our reality. Given this, does the attempt to discern these structures appear any less of a valid enterprise than it did when it was believed to promise the possibility of a “true” description? Likewise, given the clear power that the writing and telling of history is understood to exert over society, is there any less of a pressing need for the discipline to be actively questioned and challenged about the underlying structures of its practices? Given its constant changes, the basic nature of the questions and issues that history raises will transform over time. A self-reflective practice that is implicated in its disciplinary matrix will almost certainly be too close to these processes of change to be able to accurately observe them. As a result, the philosophy of history will remain useful precisely because of its distance from history proper. It can serve not only as a check, but as a critical conscience, a force able to alter the terms on which history is forced to understand itself. According to this analysis, there is more of a need for the philosophy of history than ever before. In this conclusion, I have suggested the kind of self-understanding that I believe is necessary for the discipline
to fulfill this need. It remains to be seen whether such a program can be realistically accomplished.
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