

# History and Theory after “Auschwitz”

by

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# CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	3
ABBREVIATIONS .....	4
INTRODUCTION:THE SPLIT BETWEEN HISTORY AND THEORY.....	5
CHAPTER ONE: “AFTER AUSCHWITZ” .....	11
CHAPTER TWO:HAYDEN WHITE .....	32
CHAPTER THREE: GETTING BACK TO THE PAST .....	57
CONCLUSION: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN HISTORY AND THEORY .....	82
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	86

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# ABBREVIATIONS

- BH H. V White, "The Burden of History," in *Tropics Of Discourse: Essays In Cultural Criticism* (Johns Hopkins Univ Pr, 1985).
- HE Hayden White, "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth," in *Probing the Limits of Representation : Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, ed. Saul Friedländer (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).
- LS George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (Atheneum New York, 1967).
- MH Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).
- P Eelco Runia, "Presence," *History and Theory* 45, No. 1 (2006): 1-29.
- PP Hans Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence : What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004).
- SE Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime historical experience* (Stanford Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005).
- ST Eelco Runia, "1. Spots Of Time," *History and Theory* 45, no. 3 (2006).
- TT Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: Norton, 1994).

# INTRODUCTION:

## THE SPLIT BETWEEN HISTORY AND THEORY

In some of the most influential writing on both the theory and the practice of history, there have been calls for history to return to the past. It may seem silly that a discipline about the past needs to be reminded to get back to what it purports to study. However, over the course of the last half century, historical discourse has been increasingly accused of focusing on language and the way history is mediated instead of on the past. The idea that underlying the representation of history is something real that actually occurred in the past has been increasingly overlooked in the preoccupation with the way history is mediated. To some, it seems as if it has been forgotten that although a historian can create history, he cannot create the past.

Both the writing on historical theory and the practice of history include appeals to history for a return to the past. On one side, the “theory” side, stand Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Frank Ankersmit, and Eelco Runia, who all published essays in a *History and Theory* forum on “presence” in October 2006. They argue that we can get back to the past through experiences that exist outside of language and meaning. In doing so, they hold that the way we relate to the past has nothing to do with history. They offer ways to get back to the past but wind up abandoning history, as their theories cannot be applied to the actual practice of history.

On the other side, the “history” side, stand Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacobs. While Ankersmit, Gumbrecht, and Runia are published in *History and Theory*, Appleby *et al.*’s writing is also widely read, especially in the classroom. As Ethan Kleinberg writes:

“It is worth noting that two of the three would go on to be presidents of the American Historical Association (Appleby in 1997, Hunt in 2002), that the book was published by a trade press (W. W. Norton), and that it is still available in paperback. All this is to say that it was and remains a highly influential book for students of the practice of history.<sup>1</sup>

This book is as influential for the practice of history as the articles published in *History and Theory* are for the theory of history. Appleby *et al.* argue in favor of a new objectivity, which they claim can bring historians back to the past. As long as historians express a curiosity about the past and a commitment to faithfully representing it, they will be able to get out of language and back to truth about the past. Appleby *et al.* make their argument stand up by citing the morally charged dangers that can occur if their claims are not applied to the practice of history, instead of by appealing to the vast amount of philosophy and theory written about the issue that they broach. In doing so, they advocate for history without theoretical reflection. Theory without implications for history stands on one side while history that does not engage with theory stands on the other. Though there are several thinkers that could be used to illustrate each position, I chose thinkers that are representative of the major issues on each side of the split.

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<sup>1</sup> Ethan Kleinberg, “Haunting History: Deconstruction and The Spirit Of Revision,” *History and Theory* 46, no. 4 (2007): 113-143.

In order to understand the nature of the split between history and theory, I argue that we must begin with the Holocaust. As Alon Confino explains:

Historical studies of the Holocaust have often been separated from the theoretical discussion of the limits of representation. Important scholars who theorized about the Holocaust (Dan Diner, Dominick LaCapra, Dan Stone) were often different from those who wrote its history (Raul Hilberg, Christopher Browning).<sup>2</sup>

The divide between historical studies and theoretical discussion is quite clear in writing about the Holocaust. It is uncommon for someone who does serious theoretical work to also write history, and vice versa. However, though the Holocaust serves to illustrate the split between history and theory, I push this further and argue that thinking through the Holocaust and its historical representation is actually what led to the split. I will go back try to understand the gap between history and theory by tracing it through the historical theory that began with reflecting on the possibility of representing the Holocaust.

The Holocaust is often invoked as a limit case that challenges our ability to do history. Strategies that seem to work for representing other historical events run into trouble when applied to the Holocaust. There is no consensus about exactly why this is the case—arguments have been made that it is because of its nearness, monstrosity, uniqueness, or great moral weight. Perhaps we are afraid that our way of conceiving of ourselves and our history is what led to the Holocaust and that continuing to do it in the same way will cause history to repeat itself. In reality, it is probably a combination of all of

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<sup>2</sup> A. Confino, "1. Narrative Form And Historical Sensation: On Saul Friedländer's *The Years Of Extermination*," *History and Theory* 48, no. 3 (2009): 207.

these reasons. What we do know for sure is that the Holocaust calls history itself into question and forces us to reflect on how and why we do history.

In Chapter One, I trace four thinkers, Theodor Adorno, George Steiner, Maurice Blanchot, and Jean Francois Lyotard, through their attempts to think through the possibilities that go along with representing the Holocaust. They all share a sense that we cannot live or do history in the same way as before the Holocaust. History can no longer be seen as a grand narrative that gives meaning to everything and the idea that history is the story of humanity's upward progress is destroyed. Any representation or way of giving meaning that claims absolute authority over all the other ways is called into question, as this may be the sort of thinking that made fascism and the Holocaust possible. Historical representation must be done with a self-consciousness that recognizes its own inadequacy. After the Holocaust, history and meaning can only exist in fragments. To deal with this fragmentation, these thinkers begin to explore language and call attention to the gap between the represented (the past) and its representation (history). Ultimately, they leave us with only language and no stable meaning, which is taken up by Jacques Derrida. As part of this trajectory, poststructuralism can be seen as a response to the Holocaust.

Hayden White takes up these issues concerning the status of language and representation that were raised in response to the Holocaust and deals with them in his theory of history that emphasizes the literary quality of history. Chapter Two focuses almost solely on White. Concerns having to do

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with representing the Holocaust come to bear on his historical theory and open up an intense debate over whether the Holocaust has (or should have) limits on its representation at a conference called “Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’: Probing the Limits of Representation.” Critics of White’s theory argue that it opens the door to a crippling relativism, in which there are no grounds on which to judge between representations, thereby opening the door to Holocaust denial. At the conference, objections are raised to White’s theory of history that include an accusation that his theory embodies fascist ideologies and the criticism that narrating historical events obscures their meaning—a chronicle would function better to represent the Holocaust. Because of the moral weight that goes along with representing the Holocaust, its representation unleashes anxieties about the consequences of representing it inadequately or in a way that denies the horrific event.

Ankersmit, Gumbrecht, and Runia argue that in historical reflections like White’s, too much emphasis is placed on how an event is narrated that it leaves the past behind. In the first half of Chapter Three, I argue that in an attempt to get out of language that privileges experience over mediation, these thinkers wind up abandoning history. In the second half, I trace Appleby, Hunt, and Jacobs through their attempt to get back to truth in history. They use the fears unleashed by the critics of White that claim the literary and constructed character of history in his theory opens the door to moral relativism that can allow for Holocaust denial. They also play into fears that postmodernism is based on fascist thinking because it can be traced back to Nietzsche and Heidegger. Instead of giving a theoretical defense of

their argument, Appleby *et al.* use the dangers of misrepresenting the Holocaust as the consequence of not committing to a search for objective truth in history. In doing so, they disengage history from theory.

The split between history and theory is a reality, but this does not mean that it cannot be or has not been bridged. Tracing the divide back to the Holocaust gives us insight about how and why it occurred, providing us with an understanding that can help us remedy it. I argue that in order to overcome the gap, we need people who are both practicing historians and theorists of history. In combining practical and theoretical approaches to history, we will gain a self-critical and reflective approach to representing the past.

# CHAPTER ONE:

## “AFTER AUSCHWITZ”

Theodor Adorno, George Steiner, Maurice Blanchot, and Jean Francois all hold that the Holocaust has fundamentally altered how we think about ourselves and history. In “Auschwitz,” something so severe occurred that it demands a reevaluation of traditional ways of understanding—traditional approaches to history are not appropriate for the Holocaust. These four thinkers build off of each other to open up questions if it is possible to represent the Holocaust, and if so, how to go about it.

### 1.1 Theodor Adorno

When speaking of the (im)possibility of representing the Holocaust, thinkers frequently cite Theodor Adorno’s “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” However, when presented out of context and interpreted literally, as has often been done, Adorno’s sentence (a mere phrase in the original German: “nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch”) is grossly misunderstood. Rather than advocating for a ban on post-Auschwitz poetry writing, Adorno is attempting to shed light on the larger issues of representation that come up when writing about the Holocaust. Writing after Auschwitz is possible, but it is barbaric if it is done. Adorno holds that the barbarism of writing after Auschwitz lies in the inability of the writing to acknowledge its own inadequacy for representation.

When dealing with the Holocaust, one is caught between the moral imperative to represent the atrocity and the inadequacy of words to properly represent the unthinkable. Instead of condemning poetry after Auschwitz in all circumstances, Adorno reflects on this very problem of representation. Adorno's famous words about Auschwitz appear in the concluding paragraph of an essay entitled "Cultural Criticism and Society" written in 1949. His words must be considered in context in order to be understood. The final paragraph of Adorno's essay reads:

The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. **To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.** And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation.<sup>1</sup>

Adorno identifies Auschwitz as "the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism." Though this could be examined in great detail in light of Adorno's essay and the rest of his philosophy, doing so would exceed the scope of this project. Instead, focusing only on the relevant points, it becomes clear that Adorno is identifying Auschwitz as an event so extreme that it creates two distinct eras, the era that is now conceived as pre-Auschwitz and the "after Auschwitz" era. Adorno holds that the "after Auschwitz" era is so drastically

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, 1st ed. (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), 34.

different from what came before that it requires a reevaluation of the possibility of cultural production.

Again, the phrase “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” is not meant to be taken literally or as a sentence that stands alone. Just as Adorno uses “Auschwitz,” not to point to the unique significance of that particular concentration camp, but uses it, as metonymy, to signify the entire Holocaust, he uses “poetry” as a stand in for writing and, further, all cultural production. The sentences that come before and after the phrase that has become famous as a stand-alone in English are all part of a single sentence in the original German. Adorno argues that writing after Auschwitz is not absolutely barbaric on its own terms, but barbaric because in the reification of knowledge, one loses all self-reflection and covers up the inadequacy of writing after Auschwitz. Adorno is advocating for writing that bears witness to its own incapacity to represent and acknowledges that it is attempting to represent something that is fundamentally unrepresentable.

Adorno’s writing announces the problems that go along with representing the Holocaust. By identifying the event as so extreme that it shattered the very capacity to represent in the same way as in the pre-Auschwitz era, Adorno calls historical representation itself into question. The Holocaust is not only a crisis in itself, but also becomes a crisis beyond the events because it destroyed the possibility of conceiving of history in the traditional way. History can no longer be thought of as a rational progression but must now be understood as discontinuity. In his writing, Adorno senses that things will be different after Auschwitz, but he doesn’t go so far as to

propose an absolute break with modernity. In the 1940s, Adorno was not yet fully aware of the rupture that the Holocaust is said to have caused, but through later interpretations and reinterpretations, it becomes clear that he intuited the split between the modern and postmodern eras and opened the door for the theorization about this divide. As Michael Rothberg writes:

The temporal break which we retroactively infer in the phrase ‘after Auschwitz’ had not yet taken place in the 1940s’ public consciousness. The response to, and the form of, some of the texts of the late 1940s (including Adorno’s) confirm that the afterlife of an event needs to be periodized as carefully as the event itself. An event alone does not always rupture history; rather, the constellation which that event forms with later events creates the conditions in which epochal discontinuity can be thought.<sup>2</sup>

Though the Holocaust was traumatic, it did not rupture history alone, rather, as it was taken up as part of a sequence of events in the writing of history, the extent to which it caused a split became more and more clear. This hints that events from the past do not present themselves with a ready-made meaning, but get their meaning from how they are conceived in the writing of history, which often changes over time.

Adorno himself reconceptualizes. In *Negative Dialectics*, he rethinks his assertion that writing after Auschwitz is barbaric and rephrases it in terms of whether one can live after Auschwitz:

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living...<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Rothberg, “After Adorno: Culture in the Wake of Catastrophe,” *New German Critique*, no. 72 (Autumn 1997): 45-81.

<sup>3</sup> Theodor Adorno, [*Negative Dialektik.*] *Negative Dialectics ... Translated by E. B. Ashton.* (London Routledge and Kegan Paul 1973., 1973), 363.

He modifies his statement to acknowledge that someone who has suffered intensely has the right to express that suffering. The voicing of suffering takes precedence over the inadequacy of representation, yet the victims of the Holocaust cannot voice their suffering because they died from it. Adorno is challenging the notion that people can move on from the Holocaust and continue to live onwards in the wake of it. He widens his theory from no poetry after Auschwitz to no progress after Auschwitz, which is made more clear in his discussion of the possibility of universal history.

In light of catastrophes such as the Holocaust, Adorno rejects the idea that history is a progression towards a greater good. He writes:

Universal history must be construed and denied. After the catastrophes that have happened, and in view of the catastrophes to come, it would be cynical to say that a plan for a better world is manifested in history and unites it. ... History is the unity of continuity and discontinuity.<sup>4</sup>

Though the past is made up of discontinuities, history is the result of the attempt to string these discontinuities into a continuous “universal history.” Thus, any claim to a real universal history is hollow, yet we still continue to construct it, which winds up being harmful. Rothberg explains, “Thus, while the desirability of universality is denied, its stranglehold on history is not.”<sup>5</sup> Adorno has opened up the discussion of the end of culture and progress after Auschwitz, and this idea is taken up and expanded upon by many other theorists.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 320.

## 1.2 George Steiner

George Steiner, who was clearly influenced by Adorno, addresses the status of culture and further explores the possibility of writing after Auschwitz. He determines not only that silence is an option, but also that it is, in most circumstances, the only option. In his introduction to his collection of essays entitled *Language and Silence*, published in 1967, Steiner acknowledges the centrality of the Holocaust to his writing:

My own consciousness is possessed by the eruption of barbarism in modern Europe; by the mass murder of the Jews and by the destruction under Nazism and Stalinism of what I try to define in some of these essays as the particular genius of “Central European humanism.” I do not claim for this hideousness any singular privilege; but this is the crisis of rational, humane expectation which has shaped my own life and with which I am most directly concerned.<sup>6</sup>

Steiner is convinced that the notions that man is “rational” and “humane” has been destroyed by the Holocaust—these very ideas are shown to be inadequate.

1945 has been referred to as “Stunde Null,” or zero hour, as Anton Kaes describes, “In 1945, history had indeed ended for more than fifty million victims of World War II... That something had come to an end was recognized by calling 1945 *Stunde Null*, as if history could ever begin at point zero.”<sup>7</sup> However, Steiner and Adorno would say that this is a mistaken conception, rather than indicating a time to begin again, 1945 was the time after which

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism : The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 72.

<sup>6</sup> Steiner, *Language and Silence*, viii. This will be abbreviated as LS in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Anton Kaes, "Holocaust and the End of History: Postmodern Historiography in the Cinema" in *Probing the limits of Representation: Nazism and the "final solution"*, ed. Saul Friedländer (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 207.



nothing could be the same. Steiner holds that the era after Auschwitz is radically different. He demonstrates this when he writes, “We come after. We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning.”(LS ix) Culture is not the same thing as it was pre-Auschwitz. Whereas before culture was seen to be a testament to human progress and the refinement of the mind, now it has become clear that even if a man is cultured, he can still take part in brutality. Steiner asserts that being civilized does not mean that one is ethical or good, which forces a reevaluation of the notion of culture. He denies that humanity is progressing.

Steiner writes, “The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason. To speak of the *unspeakable* is to risk the survivance of language as creator and bearer of humane, rational truth. Words that are saturated with lies or atrocity do not easily resume life.”(LS 123) Auschwitz lies outside of speech and reason, as the adequacy of speech and reason have been called into question by the Holocaust itself. The “cultured” man, who would have made good use of both speech and reason, was still involved in the brutality of Auschwitz. Thus, why should speech and reason be privileged to be able to make sense of the Holocaust?

Neither speech nor reason is adequate to explain, which leads Steiner into issues of representation. He writes:

The question of whether the poet should speak or be silent, of whether language is in a condition to accord with his needs, is a real one. ‘No poetry after Auschwitz,’ said Adorno, and Sylvia Plath enacted the underlying meaning of his statement in a manner both histrionic and profoundly sincere. Has our civilization, by virtue of the inhumanity it has carried out and condoned—we are accomplices to that which

leaves us indifferent—forfeited its claims to that indispensable luxury which we call literature? ... I am not saying that writers should stop writing. This would be fatuous. I am asking whether they are writing too much, whether the deluge of print in which we seek our deafened way is not itself a subversion of meaning. ... Silence *is* an alternative. When the words in the city are full of savagery and lies, nothing speaks louder than an unwritten poem. (LS 53-54)

In the face of writing about Auschwitz, the best thing to do is to be silent.

Reflecting on Adorno, Steiner writes, “Eloquence after the Holocaust would be a kind of obscenity (this is the meaning of Theodor Adorno’s so often misunderstood call for ‘no poetry after Auschwitz;’”<sup>8</sup> Steiner opposes the possibility of cultural production after Auschwitz; man has forfeited his claim to culture. After Auschwitz, one cannot write about Auschwitz—the best response is silence. However, Steiner acknowledges the pitfalls that would come with silence:

It is doubts of this order that have generated my own (provisional) feeling that silence is the only, though in its way suicidal, option; that to try to speak or write intelligibly, interpretatively, about Auschwitz is to misconceive totally the nature of that event and to misconstrue totally the necessary constraints of humanity within language.<sup>9</sup>

Not writing about the Holocaust is suicidal because then we cede the moral imperative to represent the atrocity. If we do this, we will have no way to remind those who come after us that it happened. Though the Holocaust is not understandable through language or reason, silence leads to obliteration.

Auschwitz represents that something happened to humanity that Steiner does not seem to think can be reversed. He writes, “On a collective, historical scale, Auschwitz would signify *the death of man* as rational,

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<sup>8</sup> George Steiner, “The Long Life of Metaphor: An Approach to the Shoah,” in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

'forward-dreaming' speech-organism (the *zoon phonanta* of Greek philosophy)."<sup>10</sup> As Adorno introduced the end of progress, and discussed the impossibilities of living, Steiner too believes that Auschwitz has destroyed the rational progress of mankind. In Steiner's eyes, the Holocaust destroyed humanity's capacity for culture. In essence, writing has become impossible.

However, though Steiner makes a bold criticism of the state of humanity and is hesitant to offer a way out, he still writes even while advocating for silence. However, he writes in an attempt to understand, which is perhaps why his transgression of his own position is permitted. He writes:

What the Nazis did in the camps and torture chambers is wholly unforgivable, it is a brand on the image of man and will last; each of us has been diminished by the enactment of a potential sub-humanity latent in all of us. But if one did not undergo the thing, hate or forgiveness are spiritual games—serious games no doubt—but games none the less. The best *now*, after so much has been set forth, is, perhaps, to be silent; not to add the trivia of literary, sociological debate, to the unspeakable. So argues Elie Wiesel, so argued a number of witnesses at the Eichmann trial. The next best is, I believe, to try and understand with what may well be the utopian commitment to reason and historical analysis of a man like Kaplan. (Steiner LS 163)

Although he holds that silence is the best option, he gives a "next best" option as well, which leaves man not entirely paralyzed by silence. Though we can no longer aim for perfection and refinement through culture after the Holocaust, it may be a means to understanding that is the second best option.

Like Adorno, Steiner agrees that the Holocaust ended the notion of humanity's progress in history and culture. Language and reason are found to be inadequate, so silence about the Holocaust is the best solution. Blanchot

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

opens up issues about the implications of being silent in the wake of the Holocaust in the next section.

### 1.3 Maurice Blanchot

Maurice Blanchot assumes and extends Adorno's thinking about Auschwitz.<sup>11</sup> For Blanchot, the Holocaust not only marks a divide between the pre- and post-Auschwitz eras, but also affects all representations, no matter when they were produced, even if they date from before the Holocaust. Though he maintains that the Holocaust is unrepresentable and demonstrates the limit case for representation, it simultaneously becomes the very basis for any representation. Understanding is only possible in terms of the Holocaust, but the Holocaust is impossible to understand.

Blanchot theorizes about the relationship between the impossibility of representing something particular and the way it can be made communicable through language. In doing so, he argues that what is being represented must sacrifice its particularities in exchange for intelligibility. This is related to the historiographical problem of the Holocaust because substituting particularities for generalities may fail to represent the unique events of the Holocaust and thus run the risk of normalizing it. Though Blanchot holds that representing the Holocaust is impossible, he believes that we should try.

In a reevaluation of his stories in *Vicious Circles*, Blanchot echoes and reinterprets Adorno:

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<sup>11</sup> In the 1930s, Blanchot wrote controversial articles attacking the French government. On his politics, see Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

That is why, in my opinion—and in a way different from the one that led Adorno to decide with absolute correctness—I will say there can be no fiction-story about Auschwitz (I am alluding to Sophie's Choice). The need to bear witness is the obligation of a testimony that can only be given—and given only in the singularity of each individual—by the impossible witnesses—the witnesses of the impossible--; some have survived, but their survival is no longer life, it is the break from living affirmation, the attestation that the good that is life (not narcissistic life, but life for others) has undergone the decisive blow that leaves nothing intact. From this it would seem that all narration, even all poetry, has lost the foundation on which another language could be raised—through the extinction of the happiness of speaking that lurks in even the most mediocre silence.<sup>12</sup>

Blanchot argues that no fictions can be written about Auschwitz because proper representation can only be given by particular individuals. However, this very representation is impossible because the way knowledge and representation can be conceived has been altered by Auschwitz, so to bear witness to it is its own impossibility. In Adorno's reinterpretation of his own thought, he questions whether one can live on after Auschwitz, and Steiner calls attention to the "death of man." Along the same line of thinking, Blanchot writes that even the survivors no longer have life because "the good that is life" has been destroyed.

Blanchot extends Adorno's thinking when he continues, "No matter when it is written, every narrative from now on will be from before Auschwitz."<sup>13</sup> Michael Rothberg points out the implications of this statement: "Auschwitz does indeed rupture history's continuity, but not simply in order to divide it into two symmetrical pieces, before and after. The world 'after Auschwitz' becomes a kind of palimpsest in which pre-Holocaust traces

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<sup>12</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *Vicious Circles: Two Fictions & "After the Fact"*, 1st ed. (Barrytown NY: Station Hill Press, 1985), 68-69.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

continue to exist in the postnarrative world as so many reminders of what has been destroyed.”<sup>14</sup> Everything, past and present, is affected by Auschwitz. The Holocaust has so fundamentally altered thinking that it extends back to change the status of pre-Auschwitz representations as well. While Adorno called attention to the dramatic difference in the “after Auschwitz” era, Blanchot holds that everything has been changed; there is no past to look back on that escapes being imprinted by Auschwitz.

Blanchot points to the impossibility of representing the Holocaust, but, unlike Steiner, does not advocate for silence. The Holocaust must be represented because it gives the modern world its meaning. However, the possibility of knowing it in its particularities does not exist, because in representing something through language, the particular must lose its unique character in order to be understood. As Ethan Kleinberg explains:

When it [the Shoah] is expressed through representation, it is always in peril of losing its singularity as the limit beyond limits and being reduced to a banality. The Shoah, like death, exists in language as infinitely ambiguous and permanently in peril.<sup>15</sup>

In comparing the representation of the Shoah to the representation of death, he emphasizes that its representation will always be opaque and in danger of reducing it to something commonplace with which we can live.

In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot moves towards a postmodern engagement with the impossible possibility of representing the unrepresentable. He writes:

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<sup>14</sup> Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's philosophy in France, 1927-1961* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 216.

But the danger (here) of words in their theoretical insignificance is perhaps that they claim to evoke the annihilation where all sinks always, without hearing the 'be silent' addressed to those who have known only partially, or from a distance the interruption of history. And yet to watch and to wake, to keep the ceaseless vigil over the immeasurable absence is necessary, for what took up again from this end (Israel, all of us) is marked by this end, from which we cannot come to the end of waking again.<sup>16</sup>

After the Holocaust, words may claim to adequately represent the disaster, but we must remain conscious that they never can. Accepting that we can never know the Holocaust in its particularities, we must still continue to try to represent it because it is the only way we can attempt to understand ourselves. Blanchot writes, "And how, in fact, can one accept not to know? We read books on Auschwitz. The wish of all, in the camps, the last wish: know what has happened, do not forget, and at the same time you will never know."<sup>17</sup> We are stuck between needing to know what happened in the Holocaust in order to grasp the meaning of the modern world and the inability to know because of the impossibility of representation.

Though Blanchot agrees with Adorno and Steiner about the impossibilities of representing the Holocaust, he does not believe this should prevent one from trying. He thinks that even an inadequate representation is necessary to help us understand the modern world. However, aspiring to an understanding of the world does not mean that we are progressing—Blanchot is just as insistent that the Holocaust dealt a fatal blow to progress as Adorno and Steiner were. Lyotard takes up these notions of the end of progress and the impossibility of representation in the next section.

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<sup>16</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster = L'écriture du désastre* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 84.

## 1.4 Jean Francois Lyotard

In Jean Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, commissioned by the Quebec government and published in 1979, he argues that knowledge has fundamentally changed and that man is now living in a postmodern era. The idea that humanity is progressing was destroyed by theorists responding to the Holocaust. Without a unifying trajectory to explain history, all that is left is fragments, and Lyotard responds to this issue. He writes, "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives."<sup>18</sup> Metanarratives, or grand narratives, present an overarching explanation of history. Lyotard argues that in the postmodern era, these types of narratives are no longer legitimate. As he writes, "The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation."<sup>19</sup> There is no longer a narrative that holds more authority than and serves as the basis for others. He explains that metanarratives have been in decline since the end of World War II. Instead of unified and authoritative knowledge in the form of a metanarrative, now, in the postmodern era, knowledge has fragmented into a great number of what Lyotard calls "language games"(borrowed from Wittgenstein). In language games, phrases show their meanings in the ways that they actually function in the contexts they are used. There is no overarching language that gives

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>18</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.



meaning to all phrases and no basis outside individual language games on which to judge between them.

In his letter “Apostil on Narratives” in *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, Lyotard elaborates on what he said in *The Postmodern Condition* and relates it to Auschwitz:

The ‘metanarratives’ I was concerned with in *The Postmodern Condition* are those that have marked modernity...They look for legitimacy, not in an original founding act, but in a future to be accomplished, that is, in an Idea to be realized. This Idea (of freedom, ‘enlightenment,’ socialism, etc.) has legitimating value because it is universal. It guides every human reality. It gives modernity its characteristic mode: the *project*, the project Habermas says is still incomplete and must be resumed, renewed...I would argue that the project of modernity (the realization of universality) has not been forsaken or forgotten but destroyed, ‘liquidated.’ There are several modes of destruction, several names that are symbols for them. ‘Auschwitz’ can be taken as a paradigmatic name for the incompleteness of modernity.<sup>20</sup>

Lyotard takes “Auschwitz” as the model event that destroyed modernity and led to the postmodern era. With the Holocaust, the grand narratives of the human progress and rationality were destroyed and lost their legitimacy. In their place are now only localized language games. Lyotard elaborates on why Auschwitz destroyed these narratives:

At ‘Auschwitz,’ a modern sovereign, a whole people was physically destroyed. The attempt was made to destroy it. It is the crime opening postmodernity, a crime of [violated sovereignty]—not regicide this time, but populicide (as distinct from ethnocide). How could the grand narratives of legitimation still have credibility in these circumstances? This is not to suggest that there are no longer any credible narratives at all. By metanarratives or grand narratives, I mean precisely narrations with a legitimating function. Their decline does not stop

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained : Correspondence, 1982-1985*, North American ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 17-18.

countless other stories (minor or not so minor) from continuing to weave the fabric of everyday life.<sup>21</sup>

Grand narratives could no longer serve as legitimating forces after the Holocaust. However, the end of legitimizing grand narratives, does not end the idea of legitimizing narratives completely but rather seems to emphasize that there can no longer be any metanarratives that claim absolute legitimacy. After the Holocaust, history can no longer have a unified meaning; there remain only fragments that are inadequate to the task.

In *The Differend* (1983), Lyotard points to the problems specific to the representation of the Holocaust that stem from adhering to grand narratives.

Lyotard explains a differend:

As distinguished from a litigation, a differend would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy.<sup>22</sup>

The idea of a differend opposes the idea of a general consensus as a possibility—only local agreements between players of the same language games are possible. A clash between two different language games leaves no way to resolve the conflict, as there is no rule that is adequate for both sides. If one language game is preferred, the other loses its ability to defend itself because it can no longer phrase. This is what happened with the Nazis; they privileged their language game to the exclusion of all others. As

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<sup>21</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition : A Report on Knowledge*, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend : Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xi.

Friedländer writes, "The striving for totality and consensus is, in Lyotard's view, the very basis of the fascist enterprise."<sup>23</sup>

In *The Differend*, Lyotard asks how one can represent Auschwitz without a grand narrative on which to ground the representation. The possibility of the denial of Auschwitz opens up if one cannot appeal to a metanarrative for legitimization. To demonstrate this, Lyotard traces a rational argument that disproves the existence of gas chambers:

To have 'really seen with his own eyes' a gas chamber would be the condition which gives one the authority to say that it exists and to persuade the unbeliever. Yet it is still necessary to prove that the gas chamber was used to kill at the time it was seen. The only acceptable proof that it was used to kill is that one died from it. But if one is dead, one cannot testify that it is on account of the gas chamber. -- The plaintiff complains that he has been fooled about the existence of gas chambers, fooled that is, about the so-called Final Solution. His argument is: in order for a place to be identified as a gas chamber, the only eyewitness I will accept would be a victim of this gas chamber; now, according to my opponent, there is no victim that is not dead; otherwise, this gas chamber would not be what he or she claims it to be. There is, therefore, no gas chamber.<sup>24</sup>

This argument against the existence of gas chambers is perfectly rational, but it is morally inadequate, which demonstrates the inadequacy of reason. We cannot appeal to reason when it can be used to make morally horrible claims.

Lyotard famously compares Auschwitz to an earthquake, demonstrating the effect of the Holocaust on everything that even shattered our ways to represent it:

Suppose that an earthquake destroys not only lives, buildings, and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes directly and indirectly. The impossibility of quantitatively measuring it does not prohibit, but rather inspires in the minds of the survivors the idea of a

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<sup>23</sup> Saul Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Harvard University Press, 1992), 6.

<sup>24</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend : Phrases in Dispute*, 3-4.

very great seismic force. The scholar claims to know nothing about it, but the common person has a complex feeling, the one aroused by the *negative presentation of the indeterminate*.<sup>25</sup>

The Holocaust changed everything. After Auschwitz, there are no grounds on which to base our representation of it, yet we must still represent. Lyotard's presentation of language games with no way to judge in between them leaves only language. Things can be represented, but there is no way to judge except from within the language game that generates the representation. This does not mean that we should unreflectively represent because all possibilities are arbitrary, but that we must be critically aware that we operate within language and use this to think through a way to represent the Holocaust.

## 1.5 Conclusion

Adorno opens the discussion of the representation of the Holocaust by arguing that writing (thus representing) in the same way as before is inadequate. Writing becomes barbaric when we cover up writing's inadequacy to represent the Holocaust in the very act of writing. We must write in a self-reflective way that bears witness to the very impossibility of writing about the Holocaust at all. Adorno identifies Auschwitz as an event that splits history into the pre- and post-Auschwitz eras. After Auschwitz, our conception of culture must be fundamentally altered. Adorno explores the question: How can we have culture after the failure of culture in Auschwitz?

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 56.

Steiner continues Adorno's thinking and comes to the conclusion that silence is the best alternative. We have lost the privilege for culture—it has clearly not made us better. Blanchot writes that understanding is a possibility because of the Holocaust, but the Holocaust is still impossible to understand. He emphasizes the difference between the particular disaster and the more general representation of it. History is affected before and after Auschwitz; Auschwitz leaves its trace on everything. Lyotard shatters the idea of grand narratives. All knowledge is local—none is legitimate in-itself and none serves as the basis for all other knowledge—to insist otherwise is fascist. He emphasizes the gulf between the represented and representation that has always been there, which Auschwitz emphasized and made an undeniable reality. In thinking through the possibility of representing the Holocaust, these four thinkers have problematized language as a means of representing. Once we acknowledge that we operate within language games, all that is left is language. They set up the “games,” and, as we will see, Derrida (and the poststructuralists) offer a way to “play” the games.

Jacques Derrida engages with this issue of how to make sense when only language remains. He responds to the situation Lyotard has presented—there is only language with no way to judge in between representations outside of the individual language game someone is situated in. Derrida acknowledges that the thought of the Holocaust has always been close to his own writing:

The thought of the incineration of the holocaust, of cinders, runs through all my texts.... What is the thought of the trace, in fact, without which there would be no deconstruction? ... The thought of the trace ... is a thought about cinders and the advent of an event, a date, a

memory. But I have no wish to demonstrate this here, the more so, since, in effect, 'Auschwitz' has obsessed everything that I have ever been able to think, a fact that is not especially original. Least of all does it prove I have ever had anything original or certain to say about it.<sup>26</sup>

His writing can be thought of as more of a response to, than a direct engagement with, the Holocaust. Derrida can be said to be writing in the shadow of the Holocaust, directly taking up the issues that Adorno, Steiner, Blanchot, and Lyotard have left him with, mainly, if all there is language, what do we do? Tracing the trajectory of thinking about representing the Holocaust up to Lyotard and then outwards to other poststructuralist thinkers such as Derrida reveals that poststructuralism has strong ties to the Holocaust, though it does not often explicitly engage in a direct response to the Holocaust.

Gabrielle Spiegel ties poststructuralism to the Holocaust by arguing that it is a second generation psychological response. She speaks specifically about Derrida, but rather than attempting to emphasize his importance in writing about the Holocaust, she is instead using him as a figure to represent poststructuralist thinking as a whole. She echoes the claims made in this chapter:

Language 'after Auschwitz' is language in a condition of severe diminishment and decline, and no one has argued more forcefully than Steiner the corruption—indeed the ruin—of language as a result of the political bestiality of our age. And yet, for those who come after, there is nothing but language.<sup>27</sup>

She traces thought about the possibility of representing the Holocaust back to Adorno and writes that Derrida finally came up with a system of linguistic

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<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, cited in Robert Eaglestone, "Derrida and the Holocaust: a Commentary on the Philosophy of Cinders," *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 7, no. 2 (2002): 1.

“play” that makes writing “after Auschwitz” possible. Perhaps we can say that Derrida offers a way to “play” Lyotard’s “language games.” However, playing the games in which there is already a large gap between language and reality leaves one with the sense that there is nothing real left anymore. The recognition of the gap between reality and its representation in language leads us to Hayden White, as his theory of history focuses on this issue.

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<sup>27</sup> Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “Revising The Past / Revisiting The Present: How Change Happens In Historiography,” *History And Theory* 46, No. 4 (2007): 11.

# CHAPTER TWO:

## HAYDEN WHITE

Hayden White has been perhaps the most influential scholar in the theory of history over the course of the last half century. His theory of history responds to many of the same issues raised by the thinkers in the last chapter.

Additionally, his theory of history comes under scrutiny precisely under the issue of the Holocaust, which brings history to focus on the debate about representing the Holocaust. This chapter will present White's ideas and focus on how they raised important questions about Holocaust representation which came to focus at the 1989 conference "Probing the Limits of Representation."

### 2.1 The Burden of History

In Hayden White's 1966 essay, "The Burden of History," he reveals the implications of history's claim to be situated impartially between art and science. He explains that for over a century, when historians were criticized by scientists, they would emphasize the artistic character of their discipline, and when they were criticized by artists they would stress that the semi-scientific nature of history did not allow for complete artistic freedom when it came to interpreting the facts. White argues that the historian's claim to this "neutral middle ground" is problematic: "In short, everywhere there is resentment over what appears to be the historian's bad faith in claiming the privileges of both the artist and the scientist while refusing to submit to critical



standards currently obtaining in either art or science.”<sup>1</sup> According to White, the historian is uninformed of the latest developments in both art and science that have made the neutral space that history supposedly occupies between art and science disappear. Thus, in his view, history claims to mediate between two disciplines that are no longer as essentially different as they were once considered, as art and science are now recognized to have a similar constructivist nature.

Considered in this light, history now appears as a result of the mistaken nineteenth-century conceptions of the dissimilarity between art and science, rather than as the necessary middleman for the two disciplines. As White writes:

When we view the work of an artist--or, for that matter, of a scientist--we do not ask if he sees what we would see in the same general phenomenal field, but whether or not he has introduced into his representation of it anything that could be considered false information *for anyone who is capable of understanding the system of notion used*. If applied to historical writing, the methodological and stylistic cosmopolitanism which this conception of representation promotes would force historians to abandon the attempt to portray 'one particular portion of life, *right side up* and in *true* perspective,' as a famous historian put it some years ago, and to recognize that there is no such things as a *single* correct view of any object under study but that there are *many* correct views, each requiring its own style of representation. This would allow us to entertain seriously those creative distortions offered by minds capable of looking at the past with the same seriousness as ourselves but with different affective and intellectual orientations. Then we should no longer naively expect that statements about a given epoch or complex of events in the past 'correspond' to some preexistent body of 'raw facts.' For we should recognize that *what constitutes the facts themselves* is the problem that the historian, like the artist, has tried to solve in the choice of metaphor by which he orders his world, past, present, and future... (BH 47)

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<sup>1</sup> White, "The Burden of History." This will be referred to as BH in the text.

History has lost the justification it once had to stand alone as a legitimate discipline in-itself. It must be rethought in terms of the newly recognized similarities between art and science.

The loss of history's justification is problematic to White in a way that relates closely to the issues raised by thinkers mentioned in the previous chapter about the possibility of writing history after the Holocaust. White cites Hitler, "What was true in the nineteenth century is no longer true in the twentieth"(BH 37). Recognizing how both Nazis and French Existentialists agree with Hitler's statement, White points out that the issue is no longer how to do history, but whether it can be done at all. As he writes, "It is no longer self-evidently true for the intellectual community at large that the disinterested study of the past—'for its own sake,' as the cliché has it—is either ennobling or even illuminative of our humanity"(BH 40). Historians must rethink their discipline and recognize that because of the uniqueness of the present situation, history itself has been called into question. White writes, "The contemporary historian has to establish the value of the study of the past, not as an end in itself, but as a way of providing perspectives on the present that contribute to the solution of problems particular to our own time" (BH 41). The study of the past must be reestablished on the grounds that it can help work out difficulties exclusive to the present. In saying this, White asserts that there is something so unique about the present that it requires a reevaluation of how and also why we do history.

The historian must examine the developments in modern art and science and apply them to his own discipline. White writes:

They [historians] must be prepared to entertain the notion that history, as currently conceived, is a kind of historical accident, a product of a specific historical situation, and that, with the passing of the misunderstandings that produced that situation, history itself may lose its status as an autonomous and self-authenticating mode of thought. (BH 29)

Like the scientist, the historian must realize that his facts are constructed by the questions he asks of the past rather than merely given. Following this, the historian, similar to the artist, must also recognize that the statements he makes will not just correspond to given facts but will rather be shaped by the metaphors he employs to organize the world of which he is trying to make sense. Facts are not something that the historian can fall back on, but will show up differently to different historians according to the way they approach history. For White, history will necessarily be written in many different, often conflicting, representations. He does not provide an overarching rule by which to judge these many different views. White posits that when the historian takes these developments in art and science into account, he will be able to free history from nineteenth-century misunderstandings with which it has been burdened.

In the conclusion to the essay, White underscores the necessity of a new conception of history for our time. He writes:

The historian serves no one well by constructing a specious continuity between the present world and that which preceded it. On the contrary, we require a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot. If, as Nietzsche said, 'we have art in order not to die of the truth,' we also have truth in order to escape the seduction of a world which is nothing but the creation of our longings. History can provide a ground upon which we can seek that 'impossible transparency demanded by Camus for the distracted humanity of our time. Only a chaste historical consciousness can truly challenge the world anew every second, for

only history mediates between what is and what men think ought to be with a truly humanizing effect. (BH 50)

White articulates the need for a rethinking of history and holds that it can provide a beneficial way of conceiving the past in relation to the present. He writes, "Such a conception of historical inquiry and representation would open up the possibility of using contemporary scientific and artistic insights in history without leading to radical relativism and the assimilation of history to propaganda, or to that fatal monism which has always heretofore resulted from attempts to wed history and science." (BH 47) However, these criteria eventually led White's theory of history to come under attack, specifically when they were implemented in expanding the number of possible representations of the Holocaust. The issue can be made clearer by first coming to a deeper understanding of the specifics of White's theory of history as articulated in *Metahistory*.

## 2.2 Metahistory

White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* analyzes the ways that nineteenth century master historiographers and recognized philosophers of history structure their works. White aims to consider their works as formal verbal structures without making any judgments about their value or accuracy. As he writes in the introduction, "This book is a *history* of historical consciousness in nineteenth-century Europe, but is also meant to contribute to the current discussion of the

*problem of historical knowledge.*"<sup>2</sup> Studying thinkers from Hegel to Croce, he presents a range of their differing ideas on what history is and of what it should consist. In doing so, White paints a picture of the nineteenth-century historical imagination as including a plurality of approaches to writing history.

Perhaps *Metahistory's* most central idea is that history is invented, not found—that the individual historian creates history through the way he approaches it. White writes:

It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by 'finding,' 'identifying,' or 'uncovering,' the 'stories' that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between 'history' and 'fiction' resides in the fact that the historian 'finds' his stories, whereas the fiction writer 'invents' his. This conception of the historian's task, however, obscures the extent to which 'invention' also plays a part in the historian's operations. The same event can serve as a different kind of element of different historical stories. (MH 6-7)

The historian does not go into an archive and “uncover” a story about history that has been hiding there all along, but constructs a historical narrative by arranging events into a coherent process. White asserts that it is unlikely that two historians would write the same history even if they were presented with the very same information. He blurs the line between history and fiction and suggests that these two ways of writing are in fact very similar. History is a genre of literature.

White does not believe that meaning is something inherent in history, but instead thinks that the historian gives a history its meaning by the way he “emplots” it, or chooses to explain it. For White, historians have four choices for the mode of emplotment they can give their story: Romance, Tragedy,

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<sup>2</sup> White, *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*. This will be abbreviated as MH in the text.

Comedy, and Satire. White does not deny that there may be other modes, or insist that each story is written purely in one mode, but for the sake of *Metahistory*, he categorizes by fours. It must be noted that the categories he employs are literary, which further blurs the line between history and literature.

Beyond emplotting history into a certain type of story, White argues that historians use different types of formal arguments to explicate “what it all adds up to.” He writes: “On this level of conceptualization, the historian explains the events in the story (or the form of the events which he has imposed upon them through his emplotment of them in a particular mode) by construction of a nomological-deductive argument”(MH 11). The kind of argument the historian uses is the result of adhering to a supposedly “universal” causal law. Each historian’s conception of what constitutes causality for the sake of historical argument differs; this rules out the possibility of a universal law. White offers four forms that a historical argument can take: Formist, Organicist, Mechanistic, and Contextualist. In contrast to scientists and causal scientific laws, historians disagree over which kind of governing laws they can use for explanation. White points out that while scientists periodically reach agreements over what counts as a scientific problem, datum, and explanation, historians do not come to this kind of consensus. He writes:

Among historians no such agreement exists, or has ever existed....This means that historical explanations are bound to be based on different metahistorical presuppositions about the nature of the historical field, presuppositions that generate different conceptions of the kind of explanations that can be used in historiographical analysis. (MH 13)

For White, historians have never agreed on what sort of problems they should study or on what would be an appropriate explanation given certain data.

Since they have come to no consensus over the nature of their discipline, the “historical” works they produce are necessarily and essentially at odds with one another.

The way that a historian conceives of the nature of history has to do with his own ideology, and thus there is a certain ideology present in every historical narrative. White writes:

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. (MH 21)

In relating the past to the present, the historian structures his account according to the options made available to him through the ideology to which he adheres.

White specifies, “By the term ‘ideology’ I mean a set of prescriptions for taking a position in the present world of social praxis and acting upon it... such prescriptions are attended by arguments that claim the authority of ‘science’ or ‘realism’”(MH 22). Thus, though there is an inherent ideological component in the way that the historian takes a stance through the way he writes the past in relation to the current world, he claims objectivity. This is problematic because White presents four ideological positions a historian can take: Anarchism, Conservatism, Radicalism, and Liberalism. Since there are several ideological standpoints a historian can take, surely they cannot all have the same claim to realism. He addresses this point: “I cannot claim that

one of the conceptions of historical knowledge favored by a given ideology is more 'realistic' than others, for it is precisely over the matter of what constitutes an adequate criterion of 'realism' that they disagree"(MH 26). Just as ideologies cause historians to have different ideas about the nature of the historical discipline, they also make historians conceive of reality in different ways. On this reading, one cannot be judged as more "realistic" than the other because each is making a claim to a different kind of realism and thus there is no criterion by which to judge them all.

Moving beyond these three layers of historical explanation, White moves into a discussion about historiographical styles. He writes, "Before the historian can bring to bear upon the data of the historiographical field the conceptual apparatus he will use to represent and explain it, he must first prefigure the field—that is to say, constitute it as an object of mental perception."(MH 30) A conception of his own historical style must occur before the historian can approach history at all. This "prefiguring the field" is a poetic act in which the historian selects a "lens" through which he is able "see" history, and only after this will he be able to string it into a coherent narrative. White elaborates:

In short, the historian's problem is to construct a linguistic protocol, complete with lexical, grammatical, syntactical, and semantic dimensions, by which to characterize the field and its elements in his own terms (rather than in the terms in which they come labeled in the documents themselves), and thus to prepare them for the explanation and representation he will subsequently offer of them in his narrative. (MH 30)

The way that the historian views the past is dependent on the way he sees the world—it is not something that is present in the past itself. This statement



demonstrates that history will always be linked to the individual historian and thus always subjective to some extent. The historian is not always aware of the extent to which he prefigures the historical field and thus “creates” the historical problem and subject he is studying through the things on which he focuses. White explains:

This prefigurative act is poetic inasmuch as it is precognitive and precritical in the economy of the historian’s own consciousness. It is also poetic insofar as it is 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. (MH 31)

Although the historian is influenced to construct a certain kind of history because of precognitive elements he may be unconscious of, the historian claims that he is writing a “true” account of the past. For White, this claim is extremely problematic, because the historian creates history in a way that is dependent on his approach to it, yet is often unaware that he does this. This theory offers a plausible explanation for why historians have claimed objectivity for so long—it could perhaps simply be that they are unaware about the extent to which they influence their own historical investigation.

White presents four tropes that historians use to prefigure their field: Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony. Rather than formulas, the tropes are paradigms of the processes through which, as White writes, “consciousness can prefigure areas of experience that are cognitively problematic in order subsequently to submit them to analysis and explanation.”(MH 36) White’s tropes are not prescriptions for how to write history, but rather models for the ways a historian can establish an understanding of his field of inquiry before he even begins to write history.

Through Metaphor, one phenomenon expressed in terms of its similarity to, or difference from, another phenomenon, as in “my love, a rose.” Lyotard employs metaphor when he describes Auschwitz as an earthquake. In Metonymy, a part of something is used to stand in for the whole as would be the case in using “fifty sail” to indicate “fifty ships.” Adorno uses metonymy when he uses Auschwitz to stand in for the entire Holocaust. Through Synecdoche, which is sometimes thought of as fitting into the larger trope of Metonymy, a part that expresses a quality about the totality is used, as in “He is all heart.” Irony functions, as White describes, “by way of negating on the figurative level what is positively affirmed on the literal.”(MH 34) Irony calls attention to inadequacy of its own ability to represent. Ironic figures of speech are usually absurd or paradoxical; White uses the example “blind mouths.”

Metaphor, Metonymy, and Synecdoche are described as “naïve” tropes because they have faith that language can grasp things accurately in figurative language. However, Irony stands alone as a ‘sentimental’ trope because it is self-reflective on its own failure to represent adequately. White writes:

The trope of Irony, then, provides a linguistic paradigm of a mode of thought which is radically self-critical with respect not only to a given characterization of the world of experience but also to the very effort to capture adequately the truth of things in language. It is, in short, a model of the linguistic protocol in which skepticism in thought and relativism in ethics are conventionally expressed...Irony tends to dissolve all belief in the possibility of positive political actions. In its apprehension of the essential folly or absurdity of the human condition, it tends to engender belief in the ‘madness’ of civilization itself and to inspire a Mandarin-like disdain for those seeking to grasp the nature of social reality in either science or art. (MH 37-38)

Though White himself writes using an Ironic perspective, he concludes *Metahistory* by arguing that acknowledging the Ironic trope will provide grounds to move away from this attitude that most of modern history is written in. If it can be demonstrated that an Ironic approach to history is just one of many possibilities, historians will be free to construct history in the ways that resonate with their goals.

In White's detailed explanation of the elements that go into creating a historical narrative, he reveals that the historian's process is more akin to constructing one's own version of history rather than discovering historical truths. He does not judge historians based on their accuracy, but this does not mean that he disregards accuracy altogether. Although historians create their history through the approach they take towards it, they do not create it out of thin air.

Frank Ankersmit provides an interpretation of what White is doing in *Metahistory* that is worth discussing:

Precisely by focusing on and by problematizing the historian's language, White demonstrates not the impossibility of getting hold of past reality, but the naïveté of the kind of positivist intuition customarily cherished in the discipline for how to achieve this goal. More specifically, what these positivist intuitions proudly present as historical reality itself is a mere spectral illusion that is created by the historical discipline itself. Surely there is a historical reality which is, in principle, accessible to the historian. But historians have forgotten about this historical reality and mistaken the product of their tropological encoding of the past for the past itself. Within this reading, White, rather than the practicing historian criticizing White, is the realist who reminds us of the difference between reality itself and what is mere intellectual construction.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> F. R. Ankersmit, "Hayden White's Appeal to the Historians," *History and theory* 37, no. 2 (1998): 187.

Ankersmit's take on White turns the tables on those that criticize him for opening up the past to relativism. White is acutely aware of the fact that though that history is something that is constructed by the historian, the past itself was something very real. While positivists have forgotten the distinction between the past and history, White emphasizes that these two things can never be the same. In blurring the two, the positivist, who claims to value observable facts and experience, loses track of the past itself, which is exactly what he criticizes White for doing. Claiming to be able to represent the past accurately through history obscures the past itself. White is trying to uncover this gap between the past and the historian's construction of it, while the positivist who criticizes White is trying to cover it over, thus moving away from past reality. The positivist could be even more responsible for blurring history and fiction than White if *Metahistory* is considered in light of Ankersmit's interpretation.

Now that an explanation of White's theory of history has been laid out, we will return our focus to the Holocaust, as White did in "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation."

### **2.3 The Politics of Historical Interpretation**

In White's 1982 essay, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation," he begins to think through the implications that his theory of history articulated in *Metahistory* will have on representing an extreme historical event like the Holocaust. White takes on questions raised by critics of his thought and uses the limit case of the Holocaust to

articulate a theory about the relationship between politics and historical interpretation.

White sums up the accusations that have been leveled against him by thinkers that believe that the relativism in his theory gives historians the license to represent the Holocaust in any way they choose:

It is often alleged that 'formalists' such as myself, who hold that any historical object can sustain a number of equally plausible descriptions or narratives of its processes, effectively deny the reality of the referent, promote a debilitating relativism that permits any manipulation of the evidence as long as the account produced is structurally coherent, and thereby allow the kind of perspectivism that permits even a Nazi version of Nazism's history to claim a certain minimal credibility. Such formalists are typically confronted with questions such as the following: Do you mean to say that the occurrence and nature of the Holocaust is only a matter of opinion and that one can write its history in whatever way one pleases? Do you imply that any account of that event is as valid as any other account so long as it meets certain formal requirements of discursive practices and that one has no responsibility to the victims to tell the truth about the indignities and cruelties they suffered? Are there not certain historical events that tolerate none of that mere cleverness that allows criminals or their admirers to feign accounts of their crimes that effectively relieve them of their guilt or responsibility or even, in the worst instances, allows them to maintain that the crimes they committed never happened? In such questions we come to the bottom line of the politics of interpretation which informs not only historical studies but the human and social sciences in general.<sup>4</sup>

White's critics hold that his theory denies the reality of historical evidence and opens the door to "debilitating relativism." They question whether the relativism in his theory will lead to a historian being able to represent the Holocaust however he wants as long as his history meets certain "formal requirements." They ask whether there are certain events that require more concrete rules, if there certain events that have a moral weight that places

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<sup>4</sup> Hayden White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation," in *The Content of the Form : Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore u.a.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Pr., 1987).

constraints on their interpretations. This leads to the question of whether an extreme event begs a special kind of representation.

White writes that this question has special significance in light of Holocaust deniers that argue that the Holocaust never occurred. He argues that even the deniers' claims are backed by historical evidence that they claim to have found by staying faithful to the "historical method." White writes:

For, indeed, as Pierre Vidal-Naquet has recently written, the revisionist case features as an important element of its brief that massive research in the archives and pursuit of documentary and oral testimony that are the mainstays of this 'method.'<sup>5</sup>

Interpretations that draw morally unacceptable conclusions can still meet the criteria of providing historical facts to back their claims. White takes the revisionist argument to be a perfect example of how an interpretation of politics stems from a politics of interpretation.

While it is recognized that history influences politics, it is not so clear that politics influences history. By a politics of interpretation, White means the way that a historian's political viewpoints play into his historical interpretation, even though the historian claims objectivity and thinks he is making a faithful inquiry into the evidence with no political leanings. In a later interview, White addresses what he was investigating in this essay:

I asked what ontological foundations allowed these historians to think, in good faith, that they were just telling the story as it actually happened, while at the same time serving the state as a way of castrating or neutralizing *overt* ideologies like Marxism, or communism,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 76.

or socialism, or anarchism for that matter, and acting as if there were no ideological component to their own work!<sup>6</sup>

In refusing to accept that history has no meaning in-itself and claiming to find objective meaning, historians cover up the politics in their interpretations. The way politics can be given credibility by appealing to history differs very much if historians are claiming that they find truth in history without acknowledging the politics in their interpretation versus if they recognize that history has no inherent meaning other than that which they give to it in their interpretation.

White concludes that an objective study of the past is likely to lead to history repeating itself, thereby hinting that claiming historical objectivity and overlooking the politics of an interpretation can lead to an event like the Holocaust occurring again. He sums up:

It is not so much the study of the past itself that assures against its repetition as it is how one studies it, to what aim, interest, or purpose. Nothing is better suited to lead to a repetition of the past than a study of it that is either reverential or convincingly objective in the way that conventional historical studies tend to be...And one of the things one learns from the study of history is that such study is never innocent, ideologically or otherwise, whether launched from the political perspective of the Left, the Right, or the Center. This is because our very notion of the possibility of discriminating between the Left, the Right, and the Center is in part a function of the disciplinization of historical studies which ruled out the possibility—a possibility that should never be ruled out of any area of inquiry—that history may be as meaningless ‘in itself’ as the theorists of the historical sublime thought it to be.<sup>7</sup>

Politically influenced interpretations of history that claim objectivity open up the risk of the past repeating itself. A claim to objectivity is never unbiased. By studying history, one learns that history is never innocent; it is never just an

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<sup>6</sup> Erlend Rogne, “The Aim Of Interpretation Is To Create Perplexity In The Face Of The Real: Hayden White In Conversation With Erlend Rogne,” *History And Theory* 48, No. 1 (2009): 63-75.

<sup>7</sup> White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation,” 82.

objective study of the past. Simply studying an event like the Holocaust will not keep something similar from happening again; it matters *how* a historian studies an event. In refusing to accept the meaningfulness of history and the ways a historian's politics impact his representations, a politically biased representation can present itself as an unbiased representation, thereby unleashing the risk that history might repeat itself.

## 2.4 Probing the Limits of Representation

### The Conference

The ramifications of White's claims came to be focused entirely on the Holocaust in the 1989 conference "Nazism and the 'Final Solution': Probing the Limits of Representation." As Saul Friedländer writes in the introduction to volume on the conference that he edited:

The immediate incentive for the conference leading to this volume was a debate which took place in 1989 on 'History, Event, and Discourse,' during which Hayden White and Carlo Ginzburg presented opposing views on the nature of historical truth. The echoes of such a debate were reinforced by still-lingering controversies on the historicization of Nazism. The extermination of the Jews of Europe, as the most extreme case of mass criminality, must challenge theoreticians of historical relativism to face the corollaries of positions otherwise too easily dealt with on an abstract level. Of course the basic questions asked here refer also to forms of representation other than the historical. (PL 2)

The debates over the nature of history could no longer remain purely theoretical issues, as they were brought to bear on the actual writing of history. As James Young writes, Friedländer realized the problems that came along with calling a conference of this sort, "Though painfully aware of the potential unseemliness in turning the Holocaust into so much grist for theoretical mills, Friedländer also recognized that he could not ignore the



essential conundrum at the heart of the Holocaust historian's project: the need to establish a stable truth of events in a decidedly unstable literary medium."<sup>8</sup> The Holocaust was a pressing issue that demanded representation, yet the historian was in a state of uncertainty when it came to how he should portray this event. The problems that arise with historicizing the Holocaust are addressed in the conference, all which fall under a problem which Friedländer sums up:

Our central dilemma can be defined as confronting the issues raised by historical relativism and aesthetic experimentation in the face of two possible constraints: a need for 'truth,' and the problems raised by the opaqueness of the events and the opaqueness of language as such. (PL 4)

In his essay in the conference volume, White pursues the line of thinking about the Holocaust as a limit case that was discussed in the previous section and offers further thought about how to deal with its representation. Several thinkers raise thoughtful objections that call White's claims into question.

### **White's "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth"**

White opens his essay with the insistence that history will always necessarily be relative. He writes:

There is an inexpungeable relativity in every representation of historical phenomena. The relativity of the representation is a function of the language used to describe and thereby constitute past events as possible objects of explanation and understanding.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> James E. Young, "Toward a Received History of the Holocaust," *History and Theory* 36, no. 4 (December 1997): 22.

<sup>9</sup> Hayden White, "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth," 37. This will be abbreviated as HE in the text.

This is an echo of the points he articulated in *Metahistory*—that it is impossible to separate history from a historians telling of it. While this characteristic of relativism is more obvious in other disciplines, history attempts to cover this over in the way that it uses a natural language to describe “facts” through a narrative telling that purports to be a “real” story that has been discovered through the historian’s research.

White’s insistence that history is relative raises many questions when it comes to writing about the Holocaust. He writes:

The question that arises with respect to 'historical' emplotments in a study of Nazism and the Final Solution is this: Are there any limits on the kind of story that can responsibly be told about these phenomena? Can these events be responsibly emplotted in any of the modes, symbols, plot types, and genres our culture provides for 'making sense' of such extreme events in our past? Or do Nazism and the Final Solution belong to a special class of events, such that, unlike even the French Revolution, the American Civil War, the Russian Revolution, or the Chinese Great Leap Forward, they must be viewed as manifesting only one story, as being emplottable in one way only, and as signifying only one kind of meaning? In a word, do the natures of Nazism and the Final Solution set absolute limits on what can be truthfully said about them? Do they set limits on uses that can be made of them by writers of fiction or poetry? Do they lend themselves to emplotment in a set number of ways, or is their specific meaning, like that of other historical events, infinitely interpretable and ultimately undecidable? (HE 38)

If the historian is free to choose what kind of emplotment he gives his history, are there limits on this? Is the Holocaust an event so extreme that the historian cannot justifiably choose just any kind of emplotment in his explanation of it? Does the event of the Holocaust force history to be written in terms of one single meaning? Or is the historian justified in treating the Holocaust as he would any other event—in such a way that there is no inherent, stable meaning?

The difference, for White, seems to lie in whether a historian thinks of what he is doing as an “interpretation” of the facts or as telling a story about them. White explains:

Whereas interpretations are typically thought of as commentaries on ‘the facts,’ the stories told in narrative histories are presumed to inhere either in the events themselves (whence the notion of a ‘real story’) or in the facts derived from the critical study of evidence bearing upon those events (which yields the notion of the ‘true’ story).(HE 39)

White continues, “It seems to be a matter of distinguishing between a specific body of factual ‘contents’ and a specific ‘form’ of narrative and of applying the kind of rule which stipulates that a serious theme—such as mass murder or genocide—demands a noble genre—such as epic or tragedy—for its proper representation”(HE 41). The essential question that the volume asks is given the freedom of possibilities when it comes to writing histories, do certain events require that a rule be applied to limit that sort of freedom, and if so, what would the limit be?

White seems to be attempting to elucidate that each history must be judged on its own terms—that the truth of a history depends on the kind of truth it claims. This, in writing, a historian must be self-reflective and transparent about what he is doing. White claims that though the Holocaust has the same possibility of being represented as any other event in history, it requires a new kind of style:

In point of fact I do not think that the Holocaust, Final Solution, Shoah, Churban, or German genocide of the Jews is any more unrepresentable than any other event in human history. It is only that its representation, whether in history or in fiction, requires the kind of style, the modernist style, that was developed in order to represent the kind of experiences which social modernism made possible, the kind of style met with in any number of modernist writers but of which Primo Levi must be invoked as an example.(HE 52)

Since the Holocaust is a distinctly “modernist” event, it will not be adequately represented by realism. This new kind of writing forces a reevaluation of history and realism. He writes:

Modernism was no doubt immanent in classical realism--in the way in which Nazism and the Final Solution were immanent in the structures and practices of the nineteenth-century nation-state and the social relations of production of which *it* was a political expression. Looked at in this way, however, modernism appears, less as a rejection of the realist project and a denial of history, than as an anticipation of a new form of historical reality, a reality that included, among its supposedly unimaginable, unthinkable, and unspeakable aspects, the phenomena of Hitlerism, the Final Solution, total war, nuclear contamination, mass starvation, and ecological suicide; a profound sense of the incapacity of our sciences to *explain*, let alone control or contain these; and a growing awareness of the incapacity of our traditional modes of representation even to *describe* them adequately.(HE 51-52)

White doesn't deny that the Holocaust can be realistically represented, but, like Adorno, denies that this can be done in the same way as before. The Holocaust itself changed the way that we can now think about history and reality. However, this changed conception of reality does not mean that the historian must give up trying to represent the Holocaust realistically, but he must consciously apply the modernist style which White deems appropriate to these events. As he writes:

This is not to suggest that we will give up the effort to represent the Holocaust realistically, but rather that our notion of what constitutes realistic representation must be revised to take account of experiences which social modernism made possible, the kind of style met with in any number of modernist writers but of which Primo Levi must be invoked as an example. (HE 52)

White decides that a new style is necessary—an ethical question about the Holocaust has opened up an aesthetic space by requiring that the Holocaust be represented in the modernist style. Here, White can be seen as

addressing the issues about representation that stemmed from the thinkers discussed in Chapter One. The same issues are brought back into focus in a response entirely directed at the difficulties of representing the Holocaust.

### **Responses to White**

There are several valid counterarguments to White's theory of history for representing the Holocaust that deserve to be summed up to show the opposition to his claims. Two of the most powerful arguments (among many), put forth by Carlo Ginzburg and Berel Lang, indicate underlying fears that White's history is tarred by fascist ideologies and that narrative interpretations risk obscuring facts that would be better represented in a chronicle.

Ginzburg, whose debate with White sparked the conference, presents a unique counterargument to White in his essay "Just One Witness." He gives a genealogy of White's historical development, with special emphasis on the influence of Italian fascist Giovanni Gentile, to show that his theory is inherently fascist and thus inadequate for dealing with the representation of the Holocaust. Ginzburg interprets White to mean that the only grounds for judging between historical interpretations are their effectiveness, which he traces back to Gentile's influence on White. Ginzburg writes:

Is this conclusion the result of a tolerant attitude? As we have seen, White argues that his skepticism and relativism can provide the epistemological and moral foundations for tolerance. But this claim is historically and logically untenable. Historically, because tolerance has been theorized by people who had strong theoretical and moral convictions (Voltaire's sentence 'I will fight in order to defend my opponent's freedom of speech' is typical). Logically, because absolute skepticism would contradict itself if it were not extended also to tolerance as a regulating principle. Moreover, when moral and theoretical differences are not ultimately related to truth, there is

nothing to tolerate. In fact, White's argument connecting truth and effectiveness inevitably reminds us not of tolerance but of its opposite...<sup>10</sup>

He claims that fascist thought influenced White to draw the conclusion that effectiveness is the only criteria for judging and argues that this is intolerant. Ginzburg's argument demonstrates that White's theory of history can be dangerous when taken up by the wrong people, as Irene Tucker writes in her review of the volume:

Gentile serves for Ginzburg less as a means of historicizing White's work by placing it within an intellectual tradition than as a warning about what can go wrong when or if White's historical relativism falls into the wrong hands. Because White's history is 'not ultimately related to truth'—that is, because its primary criterion of value is not located in some transparent relationship to a historical real—it always runs the risk of being appropriated in ways its author did not intend, of being made the ground of fascism when what one had in mind all along was tolerance.<sup>11</sup>

Since there is no way to judge the value of a historical narrative based on a relationship to historical reality, it can be taken up and used in ways contrary to what the author intended. In Ginzburg's mind, White's relativism can be made the basis for Holocaust revisionism or denial.

In White's essay for the conference volume, he spends a great deal of time discussing Berel Lang. White writes:

Lang's analysis of the limitations of any literary representation of the genocide and its moral inferiority to a sparse or denarrativized historical account is worth considering in detail, because it raises the question of the limits of representation in the matter of the Holocaust in the most extreme terms. (HE 44)

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<sup>10</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, "Just One Witness," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, ed. Saul Friedländer (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 94.

<sup>11</sup> Irene Tucker, "Review: Forming the Holocaust," *Poetics Today* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 246.

He takes Lang to advocate for a pure chronicle of the facts, because any other account would open the representation up to “the dangers of narrativization and the relativization of emplotment.”(PL 44) It seems that anything beyond recounting the facts in a chronicle would obscure the Holocaust.

In Lang’s essay in this volume, he elaborates on why writing figuratively or imaginatively through constructing a historical narrative is inappropriate for the representation of the Holocaust. He writes:

The denial of individuality and personhood in the act of genocide; the abstract bureaucracy that empowered the ‘Final Solution,’ moved by an almost indistinguishable combination of corporate and individual will and blindness to evil, constitute a subject that in its elements seems at odds with the insulation of figurative discourse and the individuation of character and motivation that literary ‘making’ tends to impose on its subjects.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, Lang argues that the moral implications of misrepresenting the Holocaust by constructing a narrative mean that the historian should keep silent and let the evidence speak for itself. He doesn’t argue for silence because he believes the representation of the Holocaust to be impossible, but for silence because the very possibility of narrative representation opens up too many risks.

Though there were many valid objections to White at the conference, we will stop at these for the purpose of the thesis. It is significant that these counters to White unleash a fear that relativism in history will allow for fascist ideologies to disguise themselves as history and for freedom of narrativity that

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<sup>12</sup> Berel Lang, “The Representation of Limits,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation : Nazism and the “Final Solution”*, ed. Saul Friedländer (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 316.

takes too much creative license with history. These fears are taken up by historians in the second section of the next chapter, as they use these fears to give their argument the moral high ground.

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# CHAPTER THREE:

## GETTING BACK TO THE PAST

Opening up the possibility that the Holocaust could be represented led to the unleashing of a flood of theories of history having to do with historical representation came to focus on language. This trend towards the hypertheorization of history that has resulted in focusing on language instead of the past has led to calls from two sides to return to the past. On the “theory” side, stand Gumbrecht, Ankersmit, and Runia, and on the “history” side are Appleby, Hunt, and Jacobs.

### 1.1 Theory

Gumbrecht, Ankersmit, and Runia present the possibility that there is something real in the past beyond the way it is represented in language. Gumbrecht opens the possibility that there is something beyond meaning, Ankersmit insists that we can access this through sublime historical experiences, and Runia provides a mechanism, “presence,” through which we can realize the effects of these experiences. In attempting to write about history, they all remind us that feeling real is not merely an illusion and insist that there is something important from the past that exists outside of language and meaning.

However, though these thinkers make important claims that help rescue us from a preoccupation with language, they diverge from the actual practice of history. Though they offer theories for how to have an intensely personal experience with the past, these theories no longer have anything to do with history. In going beyond meaning and language, they uncritically value experience, which leads to a total abandonment of history.

### **Gumbrecht**

In *Production of Presence*, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht advocates for a way of relating to the world that he calls “presence.” He writes that we have gotten caught up in going beyond what is merely physical in the world and have become obsessed with finding something other that we consider “deeper” through the attribution of meaning. He suggests that we can also relate to the world in a way that is beyond, or at least different from, assigning meaning to it. However, though he emphasizes the importance of presence and suggests that we are able to access something other than meaning, he by no means recommends abandoning meaning altogether. These two ways of relating to the world seem to occupy two different spheres, and the challenge will lie in figuring out the proper way to balance them. What is significant about Gumbrecht’s project is that he opens the possibility that there is something other than meaning that is at least equally as important.

Gumbrecht sets up his argument by giving a brief history of metaphysics (which he defines simply as that which is beyond the physical) to demonstrate the way man has lost touch with the world. He writes, “We feel,

intuitively at least, that the metaphysical worldview is related to what I have called a 'loss of the world.' This is one important reason for our feeling that we are no longer in touch with the things of the world."<sup>1</sup> In becoming concerned with something beyond what is right in front of us, we now feel at a distance from the world. Gumbrecht suggests that through presence, we can return to feeling in touch with the world.

Gumbrecht's definition of presence is quite simple: "By calling them 'present,' then, in the very original sense of the Latin "prae-esse," we are saying that things are 'in front' of us and thereby tangible. There are no further implications that I associate with this concept."<sup>2</sup> There is something important in the physical things that we can touch that we have overlooked in our concern with meaning and interpretation. As Gumbrecht writes, "My marginal (but I hope not completely trivial) contribution is, rather, to say that this Cartesian dimension does not cover (and should never cover) the full complexity of our existence"(PP 142). In thinking that the meaning which we give is the most important aspect of our relationship to the world, we have lost something fundamental to our being human, which Gumbrecht is confident we can regain through relating to the world in terms of what is right in front of us, through presence.

As we moved from medieval to modern culture, Gumbrecht argues that we shifted from a predominantly presence-based culture to a meaning-based

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<sup>1</sup> Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence : What Meaning Cannot Convey*, 49. This will be abbreviated as PP in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "2. Presence Achieved In Language (With Special Attention Given To The Presence Of The Past)," *History And Theory* 45, No. 3 (2006): 319.

culture. By contrasting a presence culture with a meaning culture, he elucidates the significance of each one. In a presence culture, humans see themselves as a part of the world that has a place within a stable cosmology. They relate to things of the world with their bodies in space and believe that these things have an inherent meaning that is not created by their interpretation but instead can be revealed or unconcealed to them. In a meaning culture, humans think of themselves as subjects eccentric to the world who produce knowledge by interpreting objects and finding the meaning beyond what is purely material. In a meaning culture, man seems to be the source of knowledge, whereas in a presence culture knowledge is revealed by something beyond us.

Rather than setting up presence and meaning to stand in complete opposition to each other, Gumbrecht explains that they go hand-in-hand but can never be reconciled. He writes, "Presence and meaning always appear together, however, and are always in tension. There is no way of making them compatible or of bringing them together in one 'well-balanced' phenomenal structure." (PP 105) However, in moments of aesthetic experience, we can experience both meaning and presence in tension with one another. He doesn't privilege meaning or presence, but depending on the mode of experience, one will dominate the other. For example, Gumbrecht writes that meaning will be dominant when reading a text, whereas presence will dominate when listening to music. No matter what the aesthetic experience though, there will always be elements of both, which is what makes the aesthetic experience unique. He writes:

But however minimal the participation of one or the other dimension may become under specific mediatic conditions, I think that aesthetic experience—at least in our culture—will always confront us with the tension, or oscillation, between presence and meaning.(PP 109-110)

He uses an Argentinean convention that you are not meant to dance a tango that has lyrics to illustrate what the tension between presence and meaning is like. It would be impossible to completely let go and fully dance the tango if you were still trying to grasp the meaning of the lyrics. This works the other way around as well: someone who was totally absorbed in dancing would not be able to understand the complexity of the lyrics. Gumbrecht does not attempt to argue that one type of experience is better than another, but simply insists that both cannot be fully realized in the same moment.

Gumbrecht characterizes aesthetic experience as something that shows up in moments of intensity that hold a great appeal to us, though we cannot quite explain why we are attracted to them. There is no obvious benefit that we can take from our aesthetic experience back to our everyday lives, yet we are still drawn to it. He refers to the aesthetic experience as a sort of epiphany, or moment of clarity, and writes:

We are referring, with this word [aesthetic], to epiphanies that, for moments at least, make us dream, make us long for, and make us perhaps even remember, with our bodies as well as with our minds, how good it would be to live in sync with the things of the world. (PP 118)

The moments of aesthetic experience, when we are caught between presence and meaning seem to reveal a sort knowledge about the world to both our minds and bodies at the same time.

Gumbrecht makes a major leap when he applies his concept of presence to history. Just as an aesthetic experience can reveal knowledge about the world through the oscillation between presence and meaning, it seems possible that a similar experience with an object from the past can reveal knowledge about a past world. He suggests that our fascination with historical artifacts does not have to do with history as we typically conceive of it, but rather with our desire for the “presentification” of the past. He seems to suggest that historical objects can actually reveal the past to us. Gumbrecht writes:

The desire for presence makes us imagine how we would have related, intellectually and with our bodies, to certain objects (rather than ask what those objects “mean”) if we had encountered them in their own historical everyday worlds, once we feel how this play of our historical imagination can be appealing and contagious, once we lure other persons into the same intellectual process, we have produced the very situation to which we are referring when we say that somebody is capable of ‘conjuring up the past.’(PP 124)

If we discover an object from the past and keep ourselves from assigning a function to it while still keeping our attention focused on it, it seems that we are able to make the past present. Gumbrecht uses the Heideggerean modes of being present-at-hand and ready-to-hand to explain how this is possible.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Heidegger defines three modes of being: the being of subjects/objects as substances (the traditional conception), the being of equipment, and the being of Dasein. He points out that the traditional subject/object mode of being that has previously been taken to be the only mode of is only one of three. He calls this mode of being *Vorhandenheit*, or “presence-at-hand.” This traditional conception treats being as a substance. Entities show up in the world as atomistic substances with properties. Entities are defined individually, not through their relationship to one another.

Heidegger’s second mode of being exposes the interrelatedness of the world, which he holds as crucial to meaning. He discusses a second type of being, *Zuhandenheit* (“readiness-to-hand”), which is the being of equipment. Instead of just being an object with a set of properties, equipment is said to “be for” something in particular. He uses a hammer as an example, and demonstrates that other than showing up as a substance

Gumbrecht suggests that we can come across an object from the past and treat it as present-at-hand, that is, as having no practical use for us. We continue to treat it in this mode, and do not appropriate it in our world as a ready-to-hand object but instead wait for the object to become present to us, to speak to us on *its* own terms. The object seems to be capable of pulling us into its own world and revealing the ready-to-hand that it once had in its world (as opposed to us making it ready-to-hand to us on our own terms).

To elucidate the complicated point that Gumbrecht is trying to make, imagine that in thousands of years from now a person in the future comes across a hammer from 2010. This person not only does not know what the object is, but also has no conception of what nails or wood are and thus no conception of what it would mean “to hammer” or why that would be meaningful. If this person takes up the object and uses it as a replacement for a broken lever on his spaceship, it would no longer be meaningful as a *hammer*. We do not just understand a hammer as an independent object with properties; it becomes meaningful in having an appropriate way of being used. Each entity is related to the others; it is in the whole hanging together of the culture in which it would make sense to use a hammer to fasten a nail into a piece of wood that makes a hammer useful, that gives the hammer its meaning. The meaning for an individual entity comes from the interplay

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with properties, as wood and metal object with a specific size, shape, and weight, a hammer also has the property of “being for hammering.” This comes from the practices of culture and the context in which a hammer is used. If you left out the property of a hammer being for hammering, it would no longer show up as equipment.

Both presence-at-hand and readiness-to-hand are dependent on the third mode of being, the being of Dasein, existence.

between the entities that relate to it. Thus, meaning is not a property of objects, but rather a field in which things show up meaningfully. Gumbrecht believes that through conjuring up the presence of the past by waiting for the past to show itself on its own terms rather than taking it up on ours, we can gain access to this entire field of meaning.

Gumbrecht suggests that this “conjuring up the past” may be possible, but does not reveal any sort of way to check ourselves, to determine whether what we conjure up is actually the past or simply our imagination of it. However, this does not seem to worry him very much. It does not seem to be the idea that we can “get the past right,” but the possibility that we can engage with the past in a way different from any concern with interpretation and meaning that Gumbrecht finds important.

Gumbrecht raises the possibility of discarding the notion that we can learn from the past (by extracting a meaning from it) in exchange for a presence-based experience with it. Through engaging with the world through presence, we can learn to leave questions about history open, and learn to enjoy our contact with it. He writes about how this knowledge can possibly be applied to teaching, and he determines that good teaching would be the “staging of complexity” in which important questions would be left open. However, he wonders to himself, “But how will such a deictic teaching style not end in silence and, worse perhaps, in a quasi-mystical contemplation and admiration of so much complexity?” (PP 128) Here, he has identified a major objection to his theory, that if we focus on presence, the teaching of history



becomes entirely individualized and subjective, based on how someone responds to the question being left open to him.

Gumbrecht doesn't want to force any answer to this question. He realizes that focusing on presence effects would be problematic, which is why he doesn't abandon meaning. He has opened the possibility for a new way to relate to the past, outside of our traditional conception of history, yet does not insist that this is the only way. Gumbrecht sets out to go beyond meaning, which is exactly what he does by introducing presence, yet he leaves the decision of what to do with presence up to us. Ankersmit will fit the concept of a presence beyond meaning into his notion of a sublime historical experience.

### **Ankersmit**

In *Sublime Historical Experience*, Frank Ankersmit writes that we have gotten so caught up in figuring out how we should represent the past that we have forgotten why we are interested in it in the first place. His fundamental concern can be summed up as: "Can we rescue the past itself from how we speak about it?"<sup>4</sup>(SE 4) He writes:

More specifically, can the historian enter into a real, authentic, and 'experiential' relationship to the past—that is, into a relationship that is not contaminated by historiographical tradition, disciplinary presuppositions, and linguistic structures such as identified by Hayden White in his *Metahistory* of 1973? (SE 3)

As a result of postmodernism and the linguistic turn, we became purely concerned with the text and essentially seemed to forget that historical texts are supposed to refer to something that actually happened in the past.

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<sup>4</sup> Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 4. This will be abbreviated SE in the text.

Ankersmit holds that in order to get back to the past, it is necessary to ask, "What is the experience of the past underlying the language used by the historian?" (SE 14). There is an aspect of the past before language and before any claims to truth and falsity that must be examined. He explains:

One aspect of how we relate to the past escapes the intellectual matrix of historical truth and representation. This is the dimension of historical consciousness or of historical awareness, that is, or where we are aware of there having been a past at all that is, somehow, part of who we presently are and to whose call we should respond in one way or another." (SE xiv-xv)

We have forgotten why we are aware of having a past, why we are initially drawn to represent it. However, through sublime historical experience, we can regain this experience of what is real in the past. In order to understand this type of experience, we must be willing to discard all concern with historical truth (because, as Ankersmit warns us, *this is simply not what the book is about*) and also be willing to accept the possibility that a historical experience can occur without a subject of experience. However, though Ankersmit says he is not concerned with any claims to truth, he does insist that the experience he is writing about is "authentic" and "real." His project abandons all concern with a communicable history and instead turns towards a theory of a highly individual experience with the past.

What would it be like to have a sublime historical experience? In nearly 400 pages, Ankersmit describes the philosophical and historical background necessary to make understanding this experience possible, but is shy about offering concrete examples to illustrate what he means. Perhaps the historical experience is best summed up by Ankersmit in his essay "The Three Levels

of ‘Sinnbildung in Historical Writing,’” using Huizinga’s words. The experience involves three elements: It is usually brought on by a trivial object, such as a seemingly meaningless artifact; that is, something that we can see as the expression of a certain historical reality, not as part of the development of something larger, such as the history of art. Second, it is described as “an intoxication of the moment”; it cannot be brought on or repeated at will. By definition, the experience must catch you off guard. Lastly, Huizinga associates the experience with the sense of touch and Ankersmit writes that it is based “in the historian’s conviction that direct and completely authentic contact has been made with the past.”<sup>5</sup>

Ankersmit seems to insist that a sublime historical experience would not be context bound, neither by our contexts nor the past’s contexts. It is as if the experience occurs on a plane of its own that exists only for a fleeting moment and then evaporates as the past and the historian both retreat back to their own contexts. Ankersmit describes it:

When responding to ‘the past’s call,’ the historian momentarily ‘forgets’ the historiographical context within which he normally operates. For a moment there is only the past itself, revealing to him its quasinoumenal nakedness with an unusual directness and immediacy. And the same can be said for the past, the object of historical experience: It hurries toward the historian with the same eagerness to rupture its ties with what surrounds it, as is the case with the historian. (SE 125)

Momentarily, both the historian and the past are able to fall out of their contexts to meet each other. Ankersmit is fond of describing this moment as a “brief ecstatic kiss.” This unpredictable moment, brought on by a trivial object

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<sup>5</sup> F.R. Ankersmit, “The Three Levels of ‘Sinnbildung’ in Historical Writing, Meaning and Representation in History, ed. Jörn Rüsen (2006), 115.

which surprises the historian, seems similar to the way that a person might recall a dream. In most cases, no matter how hard a person tries to remember a dream they had the previous night, they cannot will themselves to remember it. However, when going through their daily routine, the person might suddenly encounter an object that acts as a sort of trigger and brings the dream world flooding back all at once. This world suddenly and briefly opens up to the person, but as soon as he tries to explain or make sense of it in terms of his waking life, the essence of the dream world vanishes. There is no way he could possibly prepare for or trigger this by willing it; it happens so strongly because it is entirely unexpected.

However, though sublime historical experience does seem to share many similarities with remembering a dream, it must be fundamentally different because we do not *remember* a sublime historical experience, as we have no prior experience of it beforehand. Although a dream is not something that physically happened to us, it could be said to actually have existed to some extent in our cognitive processing of it. How does Ankersmit make sense of our ability to suddenly have these sublime experiences with no prior experience of them? He insists that they are possible, yet does not offer much evidence to explain *how* it comes to be that they can occur. The experiences seem to be something that we are suddenly just able to intuit. He writes:

Historians should learn to trust their most private and most intimate feelings on those rare occasions when what Huizinga called “the grace of historical experience” is given to them. They should realize that the best, the most sophisticated, and the most finely tuned instrument that they have at their disposal for understanding the past is themselves and their own experience insofar as this experience is not yet infected

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by the disciplinary historiographical epidemics that having infected the majority of their colleagues.”(SE 67)

Historians should trust their “most private and intimate feelings,” yet shun these if they are contaminated by “disciplinary historiographical epidemics.” Ankersmit makes this big claim, yet refuses to give rational theoretical criteria by which a historian could determine whether or not he has been “infected.”

Additionally, he posits that historians can actually come to an understanding of the past purely by trusting what would seem to be an almost mystical intuition. He writes, “How we feel about the past is no less important than what we know about it—and probably even more so.”(SE 10) Again and again, he writes that we should listen to our feelings about the past at least as much as, if not more than, we respect our knowledge of it. It would seem that our feeling about the past comes to us from an inspired source and is revealed to us by some mysterious power that knows. However, Ankersmit refuses to acknowledge anything along these lines and writes, “This certainly does not imply that we have now entered the domain of mysticism and irrationality.”(SE 121) He attempts to preserve claims to rationality while at the same time discarding any concern with being rational. Ankersmit wants to claim that sublime historical experience is incommensurable while maintaining that it is perfectly rational, and this inconsistency seems to be where his argument goes awry. His case would perhaps have been stronger if he did away with a concern for rationality at the very beginning when he stopped caring about truth claims. Paradoxically, it seems that his argument would make more sense if it gave up trying to be rational.

Ankersmit is also confusing in terms of the importance of context. He repeats again and again that sublime historical experience means that the historian and the past each meet each other out of their own contexts. However, he writes “The notion of historical experience makes sense only and exclusively against the background of professionalized historical writing.”(SE 173) How can he make this claim? He seems to be denying that context plays any part in the sublime experience while insisting that we can only understand it in terms of historical writing. How does this fit with his idea that we can be “tainted” by historiography? Are there certain types of history that are pure and therefore acceptable, and others that we should avoid? Ankersmit seems to privilege certain kinds of history while rejecting others, while not revealing the criteria he uses to make these judgments. Perhaps this distinction is something that will be revealed to us through rationally trusting our feelings as long as they are untainted, but he never fully articulates how this initial step would even be possible.

Ankersmit does hold that sublime historical experience is extremely important, yet does not give us many suggestions for what can come of it. It does not seem that the sublime experience can be related to others. Rather, the most important thing that a historian can take away from it is a way to orient his thoughts and motivate his writing. Ankersmit is making a radical claim about an experience with the past that is entirely incommunicable to others. It is interesting that he refers to this experience as sublime *historical* experience rather than as sublime experience with the *past*, as his project seems to be entirely decoupling a theory of how to experience the past

individually from any concern with history. However contradictory Ankersmit's arguments may seem, he does make important claims in insisting that there is something very real about history that is not mediated through language. Figuring out how to make sense of how this can happen, if at all, and what to do with this new way of understanding the past if it has nothing to do with the writing of history, seems to be left up to future historians.

### Runia

Eelco Runia, though yet to publish any books in English, has written several articles for the journal *History and Theory* on the subject of presence and history. In *Sublime Historical Experience*, Ankersmit argues that we can in fact access the past in the present, and Runia's work sets up "presence," a mechanism with which we can explain how this is possible. Runia sums up his project, "As presence the past is the exact opposite of what historians think it is. It is indestructible, uncannily close, and despite its closeness and its durability—utterly impossible to conserve in 'representations' that can be taken along in the hand luggage with which we traverse time."<sup>6</sup>

Runia sees many of the same problems with the historical discipline that Gumbrecht and Ankersmit have identified. He writes, "In philosophy of history, we have long been led astray by the phenomenon of 'meaning'—first by pursuing it, then by forswearing it."<sup>7</sup> The attempt to read meaning into history ended in the 1960s and was followed by an attempt to create meaning. There was a split between "critical"(engaged with how history

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<sup>6</sup> Runia, "1. Spots of Time," 305. This will be abbreviated as ST in the text.

should be written) and “speculative”(reflection on what happened) philosophy of history. With Hayden White’s *Metahistory*(1973), historians came to understand the divide between the past as it happened and the way it is represented in narratives. Speculative history was over, and historians shunned “big stories.” However, as Runia points out, saying this is over is speculative (and thus contradictory): “The (unfalsifiable) supposition that history has no master narrative is in itself speculative”(P 3). Runia wants to ask if we can ever escape from creating continuity out of discontinuity.

He writes that historians have avoided this question and have instead been lead off course by their focus on meaning. However, Runia attempts to argue that it is presence, not meaning, that we truly desire. Runia defines presence as “the unrepresented way the past is present in the present”(P 1).

He elaborates:

Presence is “being in touch” with people, things, events, and feelings that made you into the person you are. It is having a whisper of life breathed into what has become routine and clichéd—it is fully realizing things instead of just taking them for granted....It is a desire to share in the awesome reality of people, things, events, and feelings, coupled to a vertiginous urge to taste the fact that awesomely real people, things, events, and feelings can awesomely suddenly cease to exist. (P 5)

It seems that in this definition, presence is the experience with things in the world, which, in their finitude, make us aware of our being alive. Presence seems to be a new way to orient ourselves in response to the chaos of the world. As Runia writes, “Both meaning and presence are antithetical to another drive, the drive to be taken up in the flux of experience.”(P 5)

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<sup>7</sup> Runia, “Presence.” This will be abbreviated as P in the text.



Presence seems to be a way to order our lives that does not have to do with meaning.

Runia reveals that presence can appear to us in several different ways. It seems to center on the past's ability to create its own contexts, rather than always being determined by the context we place it in. He seems to give the past the power to shape us and our contexts that is equal to, and perhaps even surpasses, our power to interpret it and give it meaning. He discusses parallel processing, a takeoff on the concept of transference, which he explains as the historians tendency to repeat the past in the way they describe events. Runia also spends a great deal of time discussing metonymy, which he argues can make the past present through its absence. He writes, "My thesis is that the concept of *metonymy* is a surprisingly suitable tool to come to grips with discontinuity and with the need for presence"(P 6). Metonymy works because does not normalize discontinuity by assigning it a meaning, but instead "give it its due." Runia explains, "Presence is not the result of metaphorically stuffing up absences with everything you can lay your hands on. It can at best be *kindled* by metonymically *presenting* absences."(ST 309) Rather than using metaphors to "explain away" the past, metonymy seems to pull us towards the past by making us aware of the absence of the past.

To illustrate metonymy, Runia uses the example of monuments that list the names of the dead. He writes, "By providing the names of the dead, absent lives are made present in the here and now"(ST 310). He suggests that the past opens up to us in a way that makes us aware of our own lives.

By presenting an absence, we gain knowledge, but it does not seem to be knowledge in the typical historical sense. By reading the names of the dead, we do not become aware of the past as it actually happened, that is, we do not attain any factual knowledge about the people whose names are listed; it is something else entirely, as we *feel* the absence of the dead in the presentation of their names, but *learn* nothing about them. Perhaps it is in this presentation of absences that we are pulled to care about the past, to become aware of the past. With the use of this example, it becomes clear that Runia is presenting a new way to encounter the past that does not have to do with history, but with an emotional experience of the absent past.

Presence is hard to define, which Runia readily admits. He writes that we can only experience presence by its symptoms. We seem to mysteriously know more of the past than we have learned from history books and movies. Where does this extra knowledge come from? Runia knows that there must be something from the past that survives to the present, not through mediation through language, but through some other source. He does not yet seem to be sure what this other source is, but through his discussions of parallel processing, metonymy, and the ways the past causes us to rewrite our stories about ourselves, he is beginning to come to an understanding of how the past affects us.

Runia is much more willing than Ankersmit to admit that the presence of the past may very well be something quasi-mystical. He writes, "You may call it 'inspiration,' an 'Aha-Erlebnis,,' or just plain 'insight,' but the point is that it is a kind of gift from regions whose existence we normally do not

recognize.”(ST 310) Runia’s presence seems to come from a place different from where we usually collect our thoughts. It is not yet clear where this place is, but it seems that Runia wants the theory of history to keep forging ahead in this direction, towards understanding how the past is present here-and-now. However, in doing so, Runia is leaving history behind.

### **Abandoning History**

By pushing our typical assumptions about a conception of history predicated on language and meaning to its limits, Gumbrecht, Ankersmit, and Runia make important (and probably necessary) moves to get us back to the notion that there is something real about the past other than the way we choose to represent history. However, in doing so, they have essentially created a new theory about relating to the past that leaves history out entirely. They present a way for individuals to engage emotionally with the past, but do not hold that this experience can be communicable to others or evaluated according to any rational coordinates.

### **3.2 HISTORY: TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT HISTORY**

*Telling the Truth about History* is a collaborative effort by historians Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob. Though the majority of the book is an intellectual history, the authors have a definite agenda for writing it and spend the last two chapters explicitly laying out their theory on truth and objectivity and giving a prescription for the future of history. They define their argument concisely in the introduction, “Our central argument is that

skepticism and relativism about truth, not only in science but also in history and politics, have grown out of the insistent democracy of American society.”<sup>8</sup>

Their claim is that diversification has thrown the status of objective truth into question. The authors write:

In this book we embrace a healthy skepticism, and we applaud the research that has laid the foundations for a multicultural approach to human history. But we reject the cynicism and nihilism that accompany contemporary relativism. (TT 4)

The research that opened the door to this multicultural history, that is, the idea that various viewpoints and narratives about history can coexist, derived from the disavowal of grand narratives by the theorists that Appleby *et al.* refer to as the “postmodernists.” The authors recognize that postmodernist theory made it possible to give the histories of marginalized groups, but they refuse to accept the postmodern theories about truth and the constructed nature of history that made this very democratization of history possible. They invoke the Holocaust as an example for why these approaches to truth and history are unacceptable.

Appleby *et al.* argue that if there is no truth in history, there will be no way to prevent denial of the Holocaust. They cite an example of Holocaust denial:

The Institute of Historical Research, for instance, has taken out advertisements in college newspapers and professional organizations around the nation calling for research to contest the facts about the systematic genocide of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. The people behind this organization have been able to make their case public, no matter how outlandish it is, by using whatever organizational names that imply objectivity (‘Institute of Whatever’ sounds more neutral than ‘neo-Nazi, anti-Semitic propaganda group,’ for example) and by manipulating laws

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<sup>8</sup> Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 3. This will be abbreviated as TT in the text.

designed to ensure free speech. Once lies are repeated in print or on the airwaves a number of times, they begin to seem like bona fide questions for debate. (TT 5)

If there is no truth to be found in history, the authors think this will result in the inability to judge between history grounded in empirical evidence and history based in a lie such as one that would deny the Holocaust. The authors invoke the Holocaust to gain moral authority for their argument:

The experience of World War II with its horrendous new weaponry and the genocidal policies of the Nazi regime temporarily forestalled the progress of skepticism and relativism. The killing of the Jews seemed to show that absolute moral standards were necessary, that cultural relativism had reached its limits in the death camps. (TT 7)

They hold that the Holocaust demonstrated our need for universal standards of morality, but this need was only temporarily recognized and was soon overtaken again by skepticism and relativism.

Appleby *et al.* hold that postmodernism leaves humans caught up inside language and the text.

If postmodern theories are taken seriously, there is no transhistorical or transcendent grounds for interpretation, and human beings have no unmediated access to the world of things or events. Taken at its word, postmodernism means that there can be no straightforward passageway to the world outside the text, nor, by implication perhaps, any access to the text by peoples or cultures foreign to it. (TT 225)

They believe that the postmodernists decoupled representation from reality entirely, thereby preventing historians from being able to engage with past reality. Thus, they hold that postmodernists think that everything is mediated, and therefore there is no ground to on which to make judgments about historical representations, since everything is equally fictitious. This logic unleashes the fear that a history based on empirical research could be equated with a history denying the Holocaust. They write:

We see no reason to conclude that because there is a gap between reality and its narration (its representation), the narration in some fundamental sense is inherently invalid. Just because narratives are human creations does not make them all equally fictitious or mythical. (TT 235)

Their (mis)interpretation of postmodernism makes it sound like because postmodernists acknowledge the gap between reality and representation, they presume that all representations are equally detached from truth. In making this argument, they miss the point that postmodernists were trying to make about truth in history: postmodernists did not deny the validity of historical evidence, but stressed that even the most stringent research on these facts would not lead to finding a universal truth about what history *means*.

Appleby *et al.* are anxious that acknowledging how significant the historian's approach to his subject is on his narration will make the historian privilege his personal political agenda over the historical facts. They write:

The writing of history, these critics maintain, is not about truth-seeking; it's about the politics of the historian. One man's truth is another woman's falsity, and they point to the historiographical wars of the last twenty years as proof. Dorothy's dog Toto exposes the Wizard of Oz as an ordinary middle-aged man; similarly, the skeptics believe, they have revealed historians to be no more than specialized storytellers whose claims to recover the past as it actually happened belong to the smoke screen of scientific pretensions. Historians, as Hayden White has maintained, 'do not build up knowledge that others might use, they generate a discourse about the past.' (TT 244-245)

Again, this is a gross misinterpretation of White and what they call postmodern history, yet it is significant because they continue this line of argument to play into fears that postmodern thought could be based in Nazi politics, which gives the authors' argument a moral urgency that lends their argument credibility. They write:

The aims of postmodernists have been the subject of intense debate. Although they tend to believe that all knowledge is deeply political, their own politics are only obliquely expressed, and usually as criticism rather than as prescription. Their notions about power have been questioned because two of their most important intellectual forebears, the German philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, made notoriously antidemocratic, anti-Western, and antihumanist pronouncements and were associated, sometimes fairly, sometimes not, with anti-Semitism. Hitler cited Nietzsche's writings in support of his racial ideology, and Heidegger himself joined the Nazi Party. Although most theorists of postmodernity have clearly rejected the proto-fascist and anti-Semitic implications of the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger, doubts remain about the ease with which one can separate the strands in their thought. (TT 206)

The authors believe that most of postmodern criticism can be traced back to Nietzsche and Heidegger through Foucault and Derrida, which opens up the question of whether all postmodern theory is at root anti-Semitic and thus taints postmodern thought with the mark of the Holocaust.

Because Appleby *et al.* believe that a postmodern approach to the past has entirely disengaged historians from any engagement with historical evidence, they provide a new way to get back to the past. The authors admit that though it is impossible for historical research to be disinterested or perfect, a historian can still aspire to truth. As they write:

The telescope of an inquiring mind that they train on objects may later seem concave or convex, at moments fogged, even cracked, in constant need of repair, but it remains an operational tool. Knowing that there are objects out there turns scholars into practical realists. They can admit their cultural fixity, their partial grasp of truth, and still think that in trying to know the world it's best not to divert the lens from the object—as the relativist suggests—but to leave it on and keep trying to clean it. (TT 269)

They use these realizations to get to a new conception of objectivity, one that centers on the individual historian's commitment to finding historical truth that must come from an engagement with historical objects outside him.

They write, “Objects arouse curiosity, resist implausible manipulation, and collect layers of information about them. Objectivity can only refer to a relationship between persons and these fascinating things; it cannot reside outside of persons. Any standards of objectivity we erect must focus on their relationship.”(TT 260) They acknowledge that there can be no objective truth outside of individual minds, but think that they can construct a new objectivity through a historian’s involvements with objects external to him.

Though they admit that historians do have different perspectives, they claim that there is something about the past object itself that will lend the historian access to objectivity. “The validity of each reconstruction would depend upon the accuracy and completeness of the observations, not on the perspective itself. Objectivity remains with the object.” (TT 257) Historians can get to objective truth about the past as long as they focus on the historical data instead of on their own mediation of history. It seems that simply by expressing a commitment to historical “truth” (oddly, they do not spend much time discussing what this would mean), a historian will be able to grasp something real from the past. They write:

History is crucially distinguished from fiction by curiosity about what actually happened in the past. Beyond the self—outside the realm of the imagination—lies a landscape cluttered with the detritus of past living, a *mélange* of clues and codes informative of a moment as real as this present one. When curiosity is stirred about an aspect of the past, a relationship with an object has begun. (TT 259)

All that matters seems to be that the historian recognizes that he is not solely responsible for constructing the past. Once the historian does this, he will be able to make value judgments about the past.



The authors reiterate one of their goals, “What this book insists upon is the human capacity to discriminate between false and fruitful representations of past reality and, beyond that, to articulate standards which help both practitioners and readers to make such discriminations”(TT 261). Appleby *et al.* effectively ignore the historical theory and reflection on representation that has developed since the Holocaust, but use the Holocaust to play into anxieties that give them the moral high ground. They play into fears that were dealt with reflectively in the responses to White during the “Probing the Limits of Representation” conference without an understanding of the theoretical issues that underlie them. In doing so, they advocate a history divorced from theory, thereby widening the gap between the practice and theory of history.

# CONCLUSION:

## BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN HISTORY AND THEORY

The attempts to get away from the focus on language in historical representation, which became a central concern because of the Holocaust, have pushed history and theory away from each other. “Historical” theory is moving away from an engagement with issues that are relevant to the practice of history, while history is not putting theory into practice. In order to bridge the widening gap between history and theory, I argue that the historian and the theorist or philosopher of history must be one and the same. In order to write history, one must be educated in theories of historical representation, and in order to do theory, one must engage in the actual writing of history closely enough to understand the problems that warrant theoretical reflection. A perfect example of someone who has bridged the gap in becoming both a historian and a theorist of history is Saul Friedländer. In addition to his extensive theoretical work on the Holocaust, some of which was cited in this thesis, he published a highly acclaimed 700 page history of the Holocaust called *The Years of Extermination* in 2007.

Historians of the Holocaust have long struggled with the inadequacy of their own representations. Adorno addressed this inadequacy of writing about the Holocaust in his initial reflections on its representation. While most historians seek to pull events together into a coherent historical narrative that offers an explanation for how and why something happened, this sort of

explanation is inadequate for the Holocaust. Theory about the Holocaust's historical representation has stressed that assigning it a stable meaning or explanation is problematic, dangerous, and perhaps impossible. However, since the history and theory about the Holocaust have remained largely separate, the theories about representing the Holocaust have not been put to use by most historians. Combining reflection on the problems that go along with representing the Holocaust with its historical narration requires someone who is capable of being both a historian and a theorist at the same time, which Friedländer is.

By not pulling the events of the Holocaust into a coherent narrative, Friedländer preserves some of the uniqueness of the Holocaust by refusing to normalize it by explaining it away or making pronouncements about what it all ultimately means. In Friedländer's introduction to *The Years of Extermination*, he writes: "The goal of historical knowledge is to domesticate disbelief, to explain it away. In this book I wish to offer a thorough historical study of the extermination of the Jews of Europe, without eliminating or domesticating that initial sense of disbelief."<sup>1</sup> In preserving disbelief, Friedländer integrates theoretical reflection into his history. Wulf Kansteiner describes the nature of Friedländer's success:

Friedländer recognized that a history of an event like the Holocaust can succeed as an ethical and intellectual intervention only if the text acknowledges the limits of historical explanation, and features honest reflections on these limits as an integral part of its narrative design.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945*, 1st ed. (HarperCollins, 2007), xxvi.

<sup>2</sup> W. KANSTEINER, "Success, Truth, and Modernism in Holocaust Historiography: Reading Saul Friedländer Thirty-Five Years After the Publication of *Metahistory*," *History and Theory* 48, no. 2 (2009): 51.

Friedländer acknowledges the limits of historical representation of the Holocaust, but instead of merely theorizing about it, he writes this into a history of the Holocaust. Combining theory with history results in a tension between recognizing that representation is impossible, but attempting to do it anyway, which echoes Blanchot. Perhaps there should no longer be writing that is purely about the history of the Holocaust or purely theoretical reflections on how it should be represented—instead, an approach that walks the line between history and theory can cull the important and relevant aspects of both sides and situate them in relation to each other.

Alon Confino believes that Friedländer is able to write a history of the Holocaust that maintains a sense of disbelief throughout because of the way he uses Huigunza's historical sensation that was so important to Ankersmit. Confino writes:

*The Years of Extermination* captures the historical sensation of disbelief through a close reading of diaries, chosen and used according to strict historical method, that endow the book with (what we feel is) a presence of the past. This historical sensation is based on the materiality of the written page, the pen, and the act of writing in the direst circumstances...The diaries transmit a sense of the past itself as if it had survived.<sup>3</sup>

Confino demonstrates that the presence of the past can be captured through an appeal to historical evidence and the strict use of the historical method. He points out that Friedländer does just this through referencing diary entries that endow his history with the past's presence. In doing so, he shows that Gumbrecht, Ankersmit, and Runia's arguments in favor of presence and

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<sup>3</sup> Confino, "1. Narrative Form and Historical Sensation," 218.

Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob's appeal to curiosity about historical evidence need not stand in opposition to each other. Writing from the perspectives of both history and theory at the same time, Friedländer is able to capture the elements that each side considers most important and, in doing so, demonstrates that bridging the gap between history and theory is possible, as long as one remains open to the possibilities presented by each side.

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