

The Eternal Return of Reality: on Constructivism and Current Historical Desires

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ABSTRACT

Appeals to reality in relation to the study of the past are often made on seemingly intuitive, indeed, even eruptive and sentimental, grounds. In this essay, I question the desire for reality that appears to motivate discussions concerning experience and memory among historians and theorists of history today, approaching things in terms of a fundamental *phenomenological yearning* and attached intuitions. While popular in current debates, these supposedly more direct ways of relating to the past are incompatible with – and in fact completely unrealistic in light of – the problematic of meaning introduced by constructivism and the linguistic turn. Yet they are at times even claimed to expressly link with Hayden White’s position. My concern here is to question both the legitimacy of these ideas generally and of concurrent (mis)representations of White and constructivism specifically. In doing so, I defend a distinction between experience *simpliciter* (which is not to claim that it could ever be simple) and a heightened experientiality, potentially created by literary works for example.

My interest here is to examine what I take to be a strong desire or even yearning for reality and presence among historians; something that appears to gradually be recovering ground from linguistic-turn and textualist theories, and particularly from the narrative constructivist focus on historical writing, on the text of history rather than the ‘object’ of the past, that was sparked by Hayden White’s *Metahistory*. I have a motivating concern behind this interest that I wish to highlight at once: I feel disconcerted by the resurgence and increasing popularity of arguments about ‘experience of’ and ‘access to’ the past.¹ My misgivings and apprehension extend also to the extraordinary fortunes over the past few decades of ‘memory studies’, which seem to have nourished (and not always intentionally) a broad need on the part of theorists and philosophers of history as well as historians to draw parallels between memory and history, often imbricated with discussions on the relationship between experience and representation.² It seems clear that many historians and theorists are fed up – as some of them have in fact clearly stated – with the problematics presented by the linguistic turn and want to get beyond it. Yet the way they hope to do this seems to constitute a retreat. Much of it appears to involve an attempt to somehow once again reject the problematics of value entailment, in other words to – ultimately – ground our ‘oughts’ in the ‘is’.

¹ For useful discussions of experience and the ‘experiential turn’, see M. Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), D. LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), and M. Pickering, *History, Experience and Cultural Studies* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1997).

² For an excellent introduction to the turn to “memory”, see K. L. Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse”, *Representations*, 69, 1 (2000): 127-150.

At the same time, we have a number of analytic philosophers, who appear to hope to reduce the whole history project to the problem of language and reference more broadly construed.³ Yet the problematic of language as capable of representing or referring does not seem to me to be one that is particularly germane to a discussion of theory of *history* specifically. It can be addressed with better and more sophisticated tools elsewhere, and then there need be no interference from the additional epistemological and ethicopolitical challenges that a study of the past faces. Agreeing to differentiate between these concerns would be useful in keeping some of the unnecessary confusions and endless repetition concerning the epistemological out of the history debate. After all, this debate still far too often and too easily degenerates into a fruitless quarrel about whether history is fact or fiction.

In a word, and to set the scene, then, what I am aiming at with all this is a defence of the perimeter of ‘theory of history’ marked out by Hayden White in *Metahistory* and in the many elaborations and refinements that he and other narrative constructivists have provided since.

I. HISTORICAL DESIRE AND THE REALITIES OF EXPERIENCE

In current debates within the theory and philosophy of history, arguments to the effect that the textualist emphasis of the linguistic turn and ‘postmodern relativism’ have gone too far for the practical purpose of ‘doing’ history have become increasingly visible. If calls for ‘moderation’ and ‘common sense’ came only from those historians and theorists of history who have been indifferent or opposed to such positions from the outset, this would be nothing new. But such arguments are now being voiced also by people who have previously embraced at least the basic claims of the linguistic turn.

These recent discussions involving history and the construction of collective memories and historical consciousness have increasingly been premised on claims regarding memory or experience.⁴ Central to them has been the ideal of ‘escaping’ from

³ Most recently, P. A. Roth, “Whistling History: Ankersmit’s Neo-Tractarian Theory of Historical Representation”, *Rethinking History*, 17, 4 (2013): 548-569. My point is not to criticize such investigations with regard to what it is they do, but only to suggest that they are not in any way specific to the consideration of history as a discipline. For further insight into the contributions that can be had from philosophy of language, see the articles by Nicolás Lavagnino, Chris Lorenz and Verónica Tozzi in this issue.

⁴ The current enthusiasm for these ideas has perhaps most visibly been inspired by Frank Ankersmit’s *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) as well as Eelco Runia’s well-timed article on “presence” (“Presence”, *History and Theory*, 45, 1 [2006]: 1-29) and other contributions to that theme issue of *History and Theory*, but they had already been quite influentially formulated by Hans Gumbrecht almost a decade earlier (H. U. Gumbrecht, *In 1926: Living at the Edge of Time* [Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997], and further in H. U. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004]). For more on these issues, see also A. Froeyman, “Frank Ankersmit and Eelco Runia: The Presence and the Otherness of the Past”, *Rethinking History*, 16, 3 (2012): 393-415, *Presence: Philosophy, History, and Cultural Theory for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. R. Ghosh and E. Kleinberg (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013), and H. Kellner, “The Return of Rhetoric”, *The SAGE Handbook for Historical Theory*, ed. N. Partner and S. Foot (London: SAGE, 2013), 148-161, esp. 157-159. For purposes of a good overview of the current state of theory, see also the other essays in *The SAGE Handbook*, particularly those by Nancy Partner and Frank Ankersmit. Finally, for the disturbing cultural roots of the “presence” paradigm in the Fascist vision of history, see C. Fogu, “Actualism and the Fascist Historic Imaginary”, *History and Theory*, 42, 2 (2003): 196-222.

linguistic and textualist positions, and the growing popularity and impact of debates in memory studies is also much in evidence. This overall trend has been noted by a number of commentators. In 2010, Jonas Grethlein, for instance, described the situation thus:

recent years have seen a new interest in experience, and experience has been used more and more as an antidote to the solipsism of the 'linguistic turn'. The immediacy of experience, of historical agents as well as of historians and their readers, offers the tempting possibility of reaching beyond narrative constructions and linguistic discourses.⁵

Along parallel lines, Anton Froeyman has interpreted a central goal of these attempts to be "to make the past present again, not as an ideological or tropological construction, but as the past itself".⁶

It seems that proponents of these – indeed existentially most 'tempting' – 'material' positions advocating some kind of access to the past, have been seeking some viable compromise to 'end of history' conclusions, and feel they have found it in ideas about 'experiencing the past'. Thus, there exists now a widening gap between those who still view representation as 'the only game in town' and those who think they might have found ways for going beyond it, or better – perhaps more appropriately given their position – *beneath* it. The tension between these respective positions is made worse by the fact that advocates of 'experience' sometimes claim to continue to accept the basic tenets of the linguistic turn, which, in history, largely amount to narrative constructivism as elaborated by Hayden White. In saying they accept the argument that a history is unavoidably a representation *and yet* simultaneously claiming that there are ways *for history* to bypass representational problematics, advocates of 'experience' end up diluting constructivism to a simple recognition of the situatedness of the historian. Taken seriously, this dual allegiance leads to what – from a constructivist point of view at least – amounts to a contradiction in their claims.

Before going on to detail what I see as the central flaws with these ideas that are intended to take us away from 'textualism', I want to recognize that they might be motivated by the generally naïve reception of narrative theory of history. Because Whitean constructivism has often been misread in a very narrow way as embracing extreme textualism and 'fiction', its usefulness for historians has appeared severely limited. Even the very basic point that narrative theory is about historical writing rather than about the past has often been missed. White's (in)famous claim that history is a process of making facts into fiction(s) has been read as saying that historical writing can by some magical derealization affect the past, not only our accounts of it. And then, in ensuing (and often seemingly endless) discussions, attention has almost inevitably returned to the issue of anti-realism. Indeed, the stubbornness with which these discussions return to a dispute about the epistemological standing of history or are reduced to a debate concerning the ontological status of the past is, forty years after *Metahistory*, quite surprising. I don't know any theorist of history who seriously defends an anti-realist position today. The critical claim of most theorists who hold on to the lesson of the linguistic turn is quite simply that there are no entailments from facts to values, no *meaningful* and necessary connection between reality and our

⁵ J. Grethlein, "Experientiality and 'Narrative Reference': With Thanks to Thucydides", *History and Theory*, 49, 3 (2010): 315–335, 317.

⁶ Froeyman, "Frank Ankersmit and Eelco Runia", 393.

judgements concerning it. Meaning is a construction. But that very idea of constructiveness is now the one under attack, even if this impetus is not explicitly recognized.

The key articulation of this new debate within theory of history can be comfortably ascribed to the controversial 2005 book by Frank Ankersmit entitled *Sublime Historical Experience*. Here Ankersmit took up the unorthodox question of, as he formulates it, whether historians (and, I assume, he means historians *qua* historians) might 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.⁷

Discussions could then shift to focus on

historical experience, that is, on how we experience the past and on how this experience of the past may come into being by a movement comprising at the same time the discovery and the recovery of the past.⁸

This was undeniably an inspiring and timely sentiment, and one that has captured the imaginations of numerous others. Indeed (and despite what I take to be the general implausibility of the notion), historians and theorists of history quite broadly now seem to suggest that the reality and materiality that the past once had (and the reality and presence of its traces) provides something that history can attach itself to – something that could resolve the difficulties history has in coming to terms with representationalist problematics. In this sense, there exists a definite desire for the past to be somehow more ‘real’ and tangible than narrative constructivism has left it for history.

From a theoretical or even from a methodological point of view there are evident problems with the arguments presented in defence of such (re)turns, however. The relationship of memory to history remains unelucidated, as do indeed the specific meanings attributed to the key term ‘experience’.⁹ Crucially, while experience is invoked as being something real and tangible, its locus has not been specified. *However*, locating experience in concrete subjectivities is necessary before it can be used for purposes of history(ing). In other words, it has to be *someone’s* experience that we talk about. Experience does not exist outside the experiencing. Thus, importantly, there are distinct differences in the types of claims that can be made about it.

Recourse to the term might imply that historians have some kind of ‘direct’ experiences of the past (as with Ankersmit, as quoted), or it might mean that historians have some way of reconstructing the experience of past agents (as in Collingwood’s brand of constructivism, for instance). Or even, in extreme form, that there is a real story that people lived that can be reconstructed.

⁷ Ankersmit, *Sublime*, 4.

⁸ Ankersmit, *Sublime*, 9.

⁹ And it seems to me that ‘materiality’ is a similarly abused concept, but that is a discussion for another time. Suffice it to note here the obvious, that the materiality *of the past* does not endure over time even if some materials do persist. Materials are always in the present and hence *of the present*, at least in terms of meaning. ‘Materiality’ acquires a very different meaning, however, when we decide to discuss the materiality of the sources in the process of interpretation. Here materiality can be used to refer to resistance to interpretation, which, like the idea of the *experiential* aspect of a text, is, to me at least, an eminently defensible and useful one to pursue. For more on this matter, see K. Pihlainen, “There’s Just No Talking with the Past”, *Rethinking History*, 19, 3 (PDF 2014, print version forthcoming 2015): DOI: 10.1080/13642529.2014.893668.

Admittedly, these ways of thinking can be more complex, and I am glossing somewhat here. Nonetheless, to put it crudely, there seem to be two distinct ways of looking at experience in relation to the past: 1) Historians can assume some kind of basic human nature by which their readings of the sources could be expected to constitute 'real' and 'true' reconstructions, whether involving re-enactment, empathy, and so on, or not. Or, 2) they might focus more on the subjectively experiential nature of their readings, and this latter option can still leave them wiggle-room to attribute some kind of hermeneutic or dialectic to what they are doing, rather than embrace any 'pure' constructivism. The sources can be 'speaking' to them, stories can exist 'out there' in reality for them, and so on.

What is noteworthy here is that most often 'historically minded' approaches do seem to rely on a desire for *contact* with the past. What, after all, is the usual motivation for historians for dealing with the past? At the very least, it involves, I would claim, some kind of investment in the idea of a reality and by (false) association a 'real' meaning out there to be recovered. And that intuition or sentiment also already holds within it some attribution of value to the real over the imagined. The fact that something *really* happened at least appears for many historically minded people to signify that there is also some deeper lesson to be derived from it, some value to be learned.¹⁰ So, quite seldom are historical sources, or even histories for that matter, read without fetishizing their 'engagement' with past reality. Or at least that seems to be the case as long as they are generically framed as 'histories' or even as 'historical fictions'.

A further and crucial point to understand is that vague, unspecified appeals to reality and to experience in the name of phenomenology are only a very small remove from positivism. This 'phenomenology' extends far beyond the legitimate bounds of subjective experience and all manner of things are assumed to be confirmed or at least confirmable by reality even on a broader, collective and epistemological level; and then the crucial distinction between fact and meaning is again forgotten.

Thinking the more subjective route further, however, focusing on 'experience' could also simply mean that history *writing* is approached imaginatively in such a way as to make the reading of it emphatically experiential. This, to me, is the single most significant contribution of Hayden White and of narrative constructivism. Indeed, such more subjectively cognisant options that focus on the fact that we are always involved in a 'reading' of some sort offer, as far as I can see, the only responsible way of talking about experience in the context of history – at least if one wants experience or experientiality to have theoretically supportable consequences.

Even though they seem so clearly distinguishable, these different levels of the interpretive and constructive process appear to be constantly confused in current debates. When experience is evoked, it is easily presented as some kind of catchall term suggesting something real and concrete. As if people in the past had experiences that are still somehow out there for historians to go to – just like those people (or some of them at least) had houses, some of which we can still visit. Simply pointing out

¹⁰ Robert Doran does well to remind us of Polybius' words, which (albeit pointed at historians, and at Timaeus in particular) could also be taken to this same more general effect: "history, if truth be taken away, is but a useless tale" (R. Doran, "The Work of Hayden White I: Mimesis, Figuration and the Writing of History", *SAGE Handbook*, 106-118, 109).

that people in the past did indeed have experiences, memories, personal narratives, and so on, is sometimes naïvely assumed to resolve the whole problem of construction. But to claim that narratives are real and exist ‘out there’ because someone once thought to construct them to explain their predicament and experiences – whether to themselves or to an audience – is to completely miss the point. Recording experiences does not get us past the problematics of meaning and interpretation any more than a word puts us in possession of a thing.

So, what sense are we to make of the various claims about *experiences* of the past?¹¹

As I already suggested, a great deal of the difficulties in thinking about experience appear to stem from another confusion, or at least a blurred boundary: the conflation of processes of memory and history.¹² This is a confusion that does a great disservice to thinking clearly. Which is to say that the misleading idea that memory and history are integrally bound together needs to be similarly scrutinized. What actual mileage is there, for instance, in the still often-heard claim that history is to a society as memory is to the individual? Or in the notion that memory is the very basis of history? Such quite popular views rely on the same obfuscation regarding personal memories, collective beliefs or experience, and representations, hence obscuring the role played by ideology and value judgements. If no break is seen between these spheres, then conservative views are automatically privileged.

Further, and importantly, in addition to leading to conformist attitudes more generally, such confusion can also lead to very one-sided ideas about what is involved in history(ing). Although none of this is to claim that there are not useful parallels to be drawn, I hope that I can show reasons for why we should be attentive when doing so.

The greatest failing of ‘typical’ historians is that they let their experience of the present – of the world in general – determine their relation not only to their own remembered (experienced) past but to the *historical* past too. Let me first explain exactly what I mean by this: We all have an undeniable relation to ‘the/a past’ simply because the overwhelming majority of the ‘stuff’ that constitutes our lives at any (and every) particular moment is already finished and ‘gone’ or at least extends into the past in varying degrees – depending on our definitions of what kind of units that stuff consists of. At the same time this stuff is also – by virtue of being part of *our* past – always present in the sense of determining much of what we are, how we react, what we identify as and with, what constitutes significant events for us, and so

¹¹ On a more prescriptive note, obvious questions that still need to be asked are: Whose experience is it that is presumed to provide some post-linguistic-turn vantage point on understanding agents in the past? What is the added value of talking about experience at such a broad level? And, would not sticking with more precise terms like sensation (sensory experiences), lived experience (personal histories), heightened sensibility (aesthetic attitude) and experientiality (the impact of representations), for example, allow for a better theoretical differentiation between the various phenomena in question?

¹² The most obvious evidence of this is to be found in the near-equivalence of history and ‘memory studies’ despite professions that the fields are distinct, and that history and memory are conceptually separate. For useful discussions of this relation, see J. Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity”, *New German Critique*, 65 (1995): 125-133, W. Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies”, *History and Theory*, 41, 2 (2002): 179-197, and G. M. Spiegel, “Memory and History: Liturgical Time and Historical Time”, *History and Theory*, 41, 2 (2002): 149-162.

on. So we have a phenomenological experience of the world as existing over time; we are not limited by any strict distinction or break between past and present in terms of sense-making on a personal level. Quite to the contrary in fact, since otherwise things would fail to make sense.

Yet, and importantly, this general phenomenological orientation is an issue that theory of history also largely tends to gloss over precisely *because its focus is on history*. In other words, theory of history tends to ignore general phenomenology because it involves itself with past and present on a level where subjective experience is not a determining issue. On this level, the present is posited as clearly distinct from the past despite the difficulty of any rigid and theoretically clear separation. Yet ignoring the phenomenological in this way – not giving it sufficient theoretical consideration – also leads to an easy, unreflective acceptance of intuitions based in that phenomenology.

While ideas of any kind of ‘privileged access’ can be questioned even in relation to subjective experience – given the problematics of interpretation, understanding and representation – it should be clear that an emphasis on experience does demarcate a boundary here: The past can still be present *to us* as collective memory or historical consciousness, for example, but this dynamic has no bearing on the past as the object of (most) academic history – and *vice versa*. And this is where much theory discussion does a disservice to clarity by focusing almost exclusively on the question of epistemology: while the past-present problematic can be handled by pointing out the inaccessibility of the past in general, and in epistemological terms, it would in fact in many cases be better and more accurate to emphasize the unavailability of the *historical* (the non-subjective) past in terms of experience. *That* is what is certainly not available directly.¹³ (This is to say that I think theory would better get past continuing resistance if it did not focus so much on the fact that ‘we’ cannot have definitive knowledge of ‘the past’ but instead concentrated on the disjuncture between personal experience of the world and the past as the object of history. At least that is where much current confusion seems to lie).

My reasons for emphasizing the break between the (experienced) present – our particular experience of the world, including experiences in our past – and the historical¹⁴ past are not, then, primarily epistemological ones. Rather, the goal is to highlight the difference between the past-present dynamic of history and the past-present dynamic of experience. There are a number of good reasons for doing so. The first involves – as stated – the tendency of historians (and some more historically-minded theorists) to allow carry-over from their practical, everyday experience of the world to their theories regarding the interpretation of the past beyond their experiences. This is related to what I would like to term the *historian’s phenomenological yearning*, by which I mean the desire that historians demonstrate for a past that makes sense,

¹³ This is not to deny that subjective experiences and personal memories can also often provide useful contributions to historical knowledge. Indeed, it seems almost unnecessary to point out something so obvious. Yet criticizing the unreflected conflation of these categories seems to easily invite an extreme reaction: counter-arguments that rely on examples where both subjective memories and historical knowledge are shown to be essential for arriving at a particular interpretation are presented, as if by extension *every* historical interpretation would then be involved in this same dynamic.

¹⁴ Which could equally well be spoken of as the *historicized* past, at least for purposes of clarity.

for a past that is like the present in the sense that it affects them, ‘speaks to them’, and so on.

By and large, this phenomenological yearning – or the desire for experience – seems to play a role in history as a discipline too. And, in this aspect at least, history’s dreams of objectivity and truth also reflect the elision of reality with experience. Because, that is, the past is unquestionably (once) real and existing on a common-sense level, this same common sense is allowed to cloud the distinction between historical and subjective pasts, and it encourages use of language and metaphors belonging to one in the other without sufficient critical reflection.¹⁵

To restate the case in the clearest possible way: defenders of presence-like arguments concerning the historical past are not convinced by appeals to epistemological inaccessibility because, to them, the distinction between the historical past and the subjective past is not in play. They – and especially those trying to make such claims on a less theoretically considered level – ‘know’, from experience, that ‘the past’ (their past) has meaning for ‘the present’ (for them in their present). In other words, they fail to fully appreciate the distinction between the subjective and the collective, as well as the very different meanings ‘experience’ necessarily takes in these.

In addition to having at least partially provoked this broad resistance to constructivism, the intense epistemological questioning and debate over recent decades has done another disservice also: theoretical discussion has gone a long way in justifying why and how it is that meanings are constructed in the present as well as showing that our knowledge concerning the past contains no inherent moral obligations or compulsions. Thus history (historical writing and the discipline) has to an extent at least come to be viewed as unavoidably presentist. In this process, however, distinctions between history and our relation to the past have also been further blurred. History, in terms of substance if not in name, is now all the more easily conflated with collective or cultural memory, remembrance, historical consciousness, and so on.¹⁶

This confusion operates on several levels. First, the idea that we need to ‘remember’ particular aspects of the past as well as do ‘justice’ to the dead has very strong cultural momentum. And, in addition to its being an important part of cultural identities and collective practices as well as of rituals, also academic history has been invested with this task as part of its institutional justification. So there is some confusion between categories of knowing and experiencing – certainly the word ‘remembering’ at least suggests some kind of experiential relation to its object.

Of course, the idea of remembrance might better describe this commitment, or at least the ethical side of it. Yet there is another confusion in play, namely the connecting of knowing and truth to ethical or moral responsibility. Even though such thinking is largely unjustified it seems quite easy to still find it in books that continue to be used to define what it is historians do. Think, for example, of Arthur Marwick’s famous (and admittedly often-criticized) claim that:

¹⁵ Kansteiner notes this same dynamic in the use of metaphors from individual experience in talking about collective memory (Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning”, 185-186).

¹⁶ On the relation of debates about memory and historical consciousness, see K. Pihlainen, “On Historical Consciousness and Popular Pasts”, *História da Historiografia*, 15 (forthcoming 2014).

As a man without memory and self-knowledge is a man adrift, so a society without memory (or more correctly, without recollection) and self-knowledge would be a society adrift.¹⁷

This latter prejudice is an important one to note because it too has deeper implications: the nostalgia for ‘presence’ and ‘historical experience’ appears to be premised on the same idea that the past can somehow guide us in our lives. If we gain access to ‘the truth of things’, those things will somehow (mystically) reveal to us something about our relation to the world, even some ‘ultimate’ way we should act, perhaps. Yet this seems to simply involve one mystification placed upon another: First the past somehow becomes available (even directly accessible) or present, then, in that moment of its being present, we glean some absolute truth about ourselves and about the world.

II. UNDOING EXPERIENCE

Part of the responsibility for the situation today, for the current state of confusion, as it were, might be laid at Hayden White’s door. In the limited sense only, though, that he has presented some very inspiring ideas that people have either misunderstood or knowingly used for their own ends. I am referring especially to his 1996 essay “The Modernist Event” because I think that essay had a demonstrable role in inspiring a great deal of these arguments for moving towards reality. The most conspicuous case in point is, once again, that of Frank Ankersmit, who, as elaborated in detail by Peter Icke, turned away from his linguistic preoccupations to follow his desire for something more substantial to do with the past – largely in consequence of several misreadings of White’s work.¹⁸

¹⁷ A. Marwick, *The Nature of History* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1970), 13. Before making the rather common and easy objection that this is an outdated sentiment, or that Marwick’s book has long been discounted in contemporary talk about history, it is worthwhile doing a search to see the many history curricula that *The Nature of History* is still listed on as central reading. It is also worth noting that, albeit somewhat altered, this sentiment is at least as pronounced in the 2001 iteration. While Marwick is most critical of notions such as ‘collective memory’, and indeed here emphasizes that the comparison between memory and history is only a “simile”, he too still begins his elaboration of the nature of history from a discussion of individual experience – “Let us start with our own personal past” – then moves on to “apprehension”, materiality and traces. Also his insistence on the importance of history to society remains emphatic: “Without history (*knowledge* of the past), we, and our communities, would be utterly adrift on an endless and featureless sea of time” (A. Marwick, *The New Nature of History* [Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001], 23-24 and 31-32). The same sentiments are in evidence among all brands of historians and promoted by contemporary introductions: professed intentions are still often to “resurrect” or “recreate the past” or to “discover [...] what it was like to live in the past” (J. Tosh, “Introduction”, *Historians on History*, ed. J. Tosh [Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000], 1-2). If this is not convincing enough, see Gabrielle Spiegel for more examples and an excellent critique of the tendency to run history and memory together (Spiegel, “Memory and History”).

¹⁸ P. P. Icke, *Frank Ankersmit’s Lost Historical Cause: A Journey from Language to Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012). The book traces the trajectory of Ankersmit’s work, focusing, as the title reveals, on the way in which Ankersmit’s interests have shifted “from language to experience”. This same shift was noted also by Ewa Domanska in “Frank Ankersmit: From Narrative to Experience”, *Rethinking History*, 13, 2 (2009): 175–195. She terms Ankersmit’s shift as one “from narrative to experience” on the basis of a statement he made in a much earlier interview with her. (See E. Domanska, “An encounter with Frank Ankersmit”, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* [Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1998], 67-99).

Here, I am particularly interested in Ankersmit's assertions in "Hayden White's Appeal to the Historians" made on the basis of his reading of "The Modernist Event".¹⁹ "Surely", Ankersmit rather surprisingly states, "there is a historical reality which is, in principle, accessible to the historian". Having made this claim, he then goes on to discuss how the strategies used by modernist literature as advocated by White – especially interior monologue – facilitate "a contact with ourselves that transcends the subject/object dichotomy".²⁰ Crucially then, in Ankersmit's reading, these strategies don't 'hide' or 'obscure' this dichotomy but instead do away with it completely.²¹

It should be clear just from these few quotes that Ankersmit, quite early on, attempts to reclaim much of what he so impressively rejected in *Narrative Logic* (1983).²² What I find most interesting is that he attributes these ideas to White, and purports to trace them all the way back to *Metahistory*²³ – so his is a negation or attempted reversal of the whole constructivist idea that we do not, and cannot, have access to the past in any meaningful sense. Or at least in the sense of meaning; there's no meaning to be 'found' for White and narrative constructivism.

It needs to be recognized that Ankersmit seems to have been very much aware of how this argument might be met – which should come as no surprise given that it was such a radical argument, and one with which I believe he may partly have simply wanted to stir things up, to move the discussion on from what to him were obvious points by then. So, in an interview in 1997, for instance, he said very clearly that he expects people to think him mad for making the kinds of claims he makes.²⁴ Since then, he seems increasingly to have attributed this 'madness', this decision to not be so brutally rational, to his holding on to a romantic view of the world.²⁵ The important point is that Ankersmit's argument in "Hayden White's Appeal to the Historians" rests on Ankersmit's reading of this one essay, "The Modernist Event", and, in particular, on the confusion he arrives at between experience and experientiality, that is, between individual lived experience, which I discussed above, and the kind

¹⁹ F. R. Ankersmit, "Hayden White's Appeal to the Historians", *History and Theory*, 37, 2 (1998): 182-193. Ankersmit had already begun his rethinking of these issues at the time of an interview with the author in 1997. (See K. Pihlainen, "'Me historiasteoretikot olemme aivan vaarattomia' – keskustelua Frank Ankersmitin kanssa", *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja*, 4 [1997]: 362-369. ["'We Historical Theorists are Quite Harmless' – A Conversation with Frank Ankersmit"]).

²⁰ Ankersmit, "Hayden White's Appeal", 187 and 190.

²¹ In this reading, modernism does not usher in "a new and distinctive way of imagining, describing, and conceptualizing the relationships obtaining between agents and acts, subjects and objects", as White famously put it some years before "The Modernist Event", but rather – in thoroughly un-Whitean fashion – it does away with these dichotomies completely (H. White, "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth in Historical Representation" [1992], *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* [Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999], 27-42, 38-39).

²² This is the main point of Peter Icke's book too: the apparent about-turn in Ankersmit's thinking. Icke leans heavily on this same article from 1998 in a chapter entitled "Ankersmit in Transition".

²³ Ankersmit, "Hayden White's Appeal", 188-189.

²⁴ Ankersmit makes no bones about this. He says: "I have committed the folly – and I persist in committing this folly – of saying that such a direct access to the past is under certain circumstances indeed possible. But everybody says that I'm completely mad to argue for this" (Pihlainen, "Me historiasteoretikot", 368 [English version from original interview, amended and approved by F.A. in 1997]).

²⁵ See, for example, F. R. Ankersmit, "Representation as a Cognitive Instrument", *History and Theory*, 52, 2 (2013): 171-193, 184-186. Ewa Domanska elaborates on this romanticism at some length (Domanska, "Frank Ankersmit", esp. 176 and 184).

of aesthetically heightened sensibility (or emotion or affect) that a literary text, especially a modernist literary text, can inspire in readers. Part of this confusion is certainly suggested in that essay by the parallel White draws between modernist literary texts with their heightening of readers' sense of experientiality and the viewing experience of televisionizations like that of the *Challenger* explosion, which White uses as a contemporary example of 'alternative' or parahistorical representation.²⁶ Now, this reference can be read as being about a direct relation to the material past, but, if one reads with care, the idea that the way this 'original' material was mediated, repeated, left largely unframed, and so on, appears to be White's actual point here – not the fact that it was a visual documentation of the 'real' event.

Crucially, White continues to remain firmly within the boundaries marked by the idea of experientiality, and aesthetic experience, leaving experience *qua* presence and perception, along with all other similar terms, where they belong, in the sphere of the phenomenological. My main complaint is that the move from lived, common-sense, everyday experience to *aesthetic* experience or experientiality crosses the boundary between what can – from a practical point of view at least – be taken as fairly unproblematic 'human' facts, someone ate in the past, they slept, they felt pain, and so on, and more involved interpretative 'experiences', someone 'experienced' some particular thing as beautiful, good or valuable, for instance. In other words, there is a distinct difference in any general, human experience and the contents of interpretive moments, even if we would still call these latter 'experience' too. Hence the need to qualify.

Consider, for instance, Ankersmit's claim that

if you have a very complex experience of reality in the way that you have with an aesthetic experience or with a historical experience then it can be argued – in my opinion at least – that something like a direct access to reality is possible.²⁷

Here he is, as far as I can see, not in fact talking about experience but a heightened sense of experientiality, as indeed all his qualifications – "complex", "aesthetic" and "historical" – also suggest. The rather vague comparison between an experience of reality and the nebulous "historical experience" that Ankersmit is after here – and at the same time in fact takes as a given – once again serves to make his arguments susceptible also to critique from philosophers of language; it speaks to issues of reference at a very general level and hence is a move that only complicates the discussion without promising much in the way of solutions.²⁸

Despite what amounts to a confusion between categories of experience, or at the very least quite differing uses of the term, we should read these claims more generously than other critics have: the appeal to a metaphorical 'truth' or insight that comes about in the process of decoding a certain amount of complexity within a relatively stable set of discourses and codes within which we are embedded *is* a use-

²⁶ See H. White, "The Modernist Event", *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. V. Sobchack (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 17-38; reprinted in *Figural realism*, 66-86.

²⁷ Ankersmit in Pihlainen, "Me historiateoreetikot", 369 (English version from original interview).

²⁸ For more on this, see Paul Roth's critique of Ankersmit's position in *Rethinking History* as well as Ankersmit's equally spirited and thorough response (P. A. Roth, "Whistling History" and F. R. Ankersmit, "Reply to Professor Roth: On How Antidogmatism Bred Dogmatism", *Rethinking History*, 17, 4 [2013]: 570-585).

ful idea in the sense of *meaning-making*, if never on the level of a fixed meaning ‘out there’. This, to me, is the central message of another of White’s core essays, “The Context in the Text” (from 1982, reprinted in *The Content of the Form*). There are ‘human truths’ to be discovered through a careful reading of the codes within which we operate; our discourses define what is possible within a particular context – as indeed various *Annales* historians have also already famously pointed out – and hence the mapping of that context gives insight into how people thought about things, how they most probably experienced something, how they viewed the possibilities and limitations they faced, and so on.²⁹ So there is no doubt that historians are correct in their very basic intuition about ‘understanding’ others. Within limits.

The critical point beyond which we cannot read all this quite as generously comes, however, when we decide how to view the status of this ‘truth’ and knowledge. The difficulty is that if we take seriously the idea that meaning is not ‘out there’ then we need to make a very firm distinction. We cannot unproblematically import appealing ideas from phenomenology or ethics, such as Emmanuel Levinas’ deliberations concerning ‘the face of the other’, for example; the way in which that jars us out of self-centred subjectivities into recognizing the alterity of the other; and even the way in which it moves us on to a first philosophy and ethics of respect for the other. That all belongs to the discussion of phenomenological experience. The same goes for intuitively appealing ideas of presence or materiality, of how materials affect us in specific ways, simply because they are traces of something, evidence of someone having done something, and we would then automatically and necessarily be moved in a particular way because someone did a particular something. And this same criticism applies equally to ideas of memory as providing us with ‘intergenerational experience’, for example.³⁰

If there is something to reality that could *necessarily* jar us out of habitual responses, our habitual ways of thinking, then it has to be on the level of signifiatory systems ‘only’ – on the level of the meaning of the text, the famous content of the form, or the direction in which the text guides us during these processes of meaning-construction. And even then, this would be so only *if that meaning could be controlled sufficiently*. In the case of a straightforward report, say a news article, or an objective history for that matter, a core part of the significance that has been ‘naturalised’ to it in the reading comes from the fact that people choose to attribute meaning and value to the fact that a thing actually happened. They imagine that, because they read about something, they are put in touch with someone experiencing something, and they (think they) feel empathy, which then entails a certain meaning for them, a certain valuation by them, a certain emotion in them, or a certain moral position to assume. Given all these assumptions, what else could indeed be expected to follow but a heightened experience, perhaps of a ‘historical’ kind? But this is a different issue, and entailments are not brought on by aesthetic and formal processes but by the

²⁹ White, *Content*, 185–213.

³⁰ Theorists of ‘collective’ or ‘intergenerational memory’ are often more subtle, of course. For the classic formulation, see M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. L. A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). For an even broader definition of collective memory as including ‘cultural memory’, see Assmann, “Collective Memory”. The distinction between the kind of cultural memory discussed by Assmann and history is hard to discern.

assumption that there is value in something being real, in something 'actually having happened'. So here we are operating on a completely different level. Again, as far as I can see, this is part-and-parcel of the confusion involved in discussions of experience and historical writing. We are in the presence, I suggest, of an 'eternal return' of reality; that is, a return of old intuitions in the form of a rediscovered sense that meaning is somehow out there, that there is in the end, and beneath it all, some form of 'presence' that can impart something meaningful to us.

In the same essay ("The Context in the Text"), White makes his own position very clear, elaborating, I would say, on the inevitable 'materiality' of language and the trick that our intuitions can easily play on us in this situation. For him:

The historically real, the past real, is that to which I can be referred only by way of an artifact that is textual in nature. The indexical, iconic, and symbolic notions of language, and therefore of texts, obscure the nature of this indirect referentiality and hold out the possibility of (feign) direct referentiality, create the illusion that there is a past out there that is directly reflected in the texts. But even if we grant this, what we see is the reflection, not the thing reflected.³¹

The reason for holding on to this qualification so sternly, for insisting that at stake is only ever a textually constructed illusion of direct reference, is a very simple (yet so often so hard to accept) political and ethical one: if there is no entailment from fact to value, from the is to the ought, then there is no implicit, unquestionable value to any particular way of thinking or being. Instead, the value of a world-view or action is only discernible in terms of its consequences. In addition to ultimately affirming the value of historical study – or at least demonstrating the value of contextualizing our understandings rather than trying to move on the level of generalities only (for how else are we to evaluate impact and consequence after all?) – this should be understood as a liberating message: we are forced to admit that we construct meaning, an admission that in turn holds out better opportunities for focusing on positive, life-affirming stories. Yet, regardless of this promise of opportunities, such ideas have so far only tended to make historians wary of constructivist theory and to encourage them in their continued denial of the fundamental relativism that it makes visible.

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³¹ White, *Content*, 209.