

Frank Ankersmit's Lost Historical Cause: A Journey from Language to Experience

Review Number:

1245

Publish date:

Thursday, 3 May, 2012

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ISBN:

9780415808033

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£80.00

Pages:

198pp.

Publisher:

Routledge

Publisher url:

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

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A book-length examination of the work of Frank Ankersmit has been long overdue. Ankersmit occupies a curious position in regards to the various skirmishes taking place over the philosophy of history in the past 30 years or so. Theorists inclined towards postmodernism – one thinks of Keith Jenkins and Alun Munslow – have been keen to co-opt Ankersmit into their camp.⁽¹⁾ Yet Ankersmit himself resists such a characterisation, and indeed, Icke's central thesis in this book is to argue that Ankersmit's best work was in fact his first published effort: 1983's *Narrative Logic*. Ankersmit got it spot on in this work; since then, however, he has moved away from this position. This is where the 'lost historical cause' element of the title comes in – Icke (and presumably Jenkins, who supervised Icke's PhD, from which this book came) disapproves of the turn Ankersmit's work has taken towards the concept of historical experience. As Icke explains, it is 'this ironic turn of events – precisely his "Lost 'Historical' Cause" of my title to this book – that can be construed as, troped as, or simply *is* the tragedy of Frank Ankersmit's move from language to (sublime) experience' (p 3). A severe conclusion indeed and one I am not entirely happy with. But let us first examine the threads of Icke's argument in more detail.

The Ankersmit who began his career with *Narrative Logic* is termed 'The good Ankersmit' in chapter one. In *Narrative Logic* Ankersmit dealt with the actual writing of history, an approach which had been kick-started by Hayden White some ten years earlier. Icke argues (and I agree) that the book can be taking as developing some of the themes broached in *Metahistory*, but 'it would be a mistake to imagine Ankersmit might have found in White a model for his own theorising' (p. 9). To briefly summarise the thesis of *Narrative Logic*

: like White, Ankersmit argues that narratives are not 'found' in the past, or inherently contained within events. Rather, 'evidence' is configured into a kind of historical order through the imposition of a narrative structure. Said structure is informed by what Ankersmit calls a 'narrative substance'. A narrative substance is a product of the present, a product of the historians' enculturation in his own time – it cannot be found within the past itself. The idea of referentiality goes out of the window; the 'past is ordered, beaten into shape and suitably appropriated in order to fit what is, in the end, an arbitrary narrative form which is retrospectively imposed on it whence to serve some human purpose to which the past itself is indifferent' (p. 35). Unfortunately for the 'good Ankersmit', *Narrative Logic* received scant attention upon its publication, garnering only four reviews, including a notorious thrashing in *History & Theory* from C. Behan McCullagh. Bizarrely, Icke tries to rectify this wrong some 25 years later by devoting five pages at the end of this first chapter to exposing the various misrepresentations, misunderstandings and various other liberties he feels McCullagh took in said review.

In the next chapter, appropriately entitled 'A moment of hesitation', we find out that the 'good' Ankersmit was perhaps not so good after all. While Icke wholeheartedly supports the conclusions that Ankersmit reached in the book, he states (using standard postmodernist verbiage) that he cannot extend this point of view to the proofs by which he used to validate these conclusions. Furthermore, the 'convoluted' style of proof that Ankersmit uses in this and indeed many of his works is strictly unnecessary. Here of course, one of the old postmodernist historians' shibboleths raises its head. Ankersmit must be taken to task for having the temerity to believe that 'his arguments can be privileged with some form of logically assembled proof of an absolute and irrefutable kind' (p. 38). The usual suspects are wheeled out – Richard Rorty, Donald Davidson, and Mary Hesse – to make the rather well-worn point that although there is indeed a 'world-in-itself' out there, the 'truth' of it – whatever that is – can never be wholly captured through language. It would be an understatement that Icke takes a few liberties with some of the philosophers he quotes in order to leap to the conclusion that 'because our so-called knowledge of the world has no ultimate reach beyond the metaphors that we use to describe it, it must follow that this presumed knowledge is of a rhetorical and not of an empirical kind – *all of it*. Rhetoric is thus the bottom line...' (p. 42). One would never guess for instance, that both Hesse and Davidson both espoused a form of realism in the philosophy of science from the way they are selectively quoted here.⁽²⁾ Just when one thinks it cannot get any worse, up pops Derrida to argue that imposing meanings on the world is an act of violence. Finally, Icke rounds all this off by stating that as a good Rortyan, the position he takes in this book is to be his 'final vocabulary', which of course must always be seen as provisional, pending better metaphors to come. Such is the tangle that postmodernist theorists of history get into because they are theoretically forbidden to say things like 'I believe this it be true', and must therefore constantly hedge when trying to express convictions'.

Icke gets back on track by pointing out that in *Narrative Logic* Ankersmit used an Anglo-Saxon philosophy of language to demonstrate continental conclusions, with predictably confusing results. The former is conceptual and foundationalist; the latter rhetorical and anti-foundationalist. Therefore, 'there exist lingering residues of 'certaintism' in Ankersmit's writings which could never be taken seriously by any anti-foundationalist' (p. 44). So far so good. But unfortunately Icke immediately goes back on the trail of the philosophy of science – arguing against Ankersmit's claim that philosophy should follow the same course as science – and he comes a cropper once again. Hesse's metaphors argument is trotted out again, closely followed by the tired argument that because there can be no stable link between word and world, there can be no knowledge of the world in itself. Strange – Donald Davidson argued that while rejecting a strong form of epistemic realism, equally a strong constructivism is undesirable either. Icke's argument implies that as we have no Archimedean viewpoint with which to test our theories against, there appears to be no criteria to prefer one theory over another. Yet the fact that we can only study the world through a conceptual scheme is old news; and many philosophers of science – Kuhn most notably – have argued for something like an antirepresentationalist theory of objectivity.⁽³⁾ Moreover, the effect of postmodernist theories of language on the philosophy of science has been virtually zero. The lesson here for all philosophers of history is that one has to do due diligence when entering the realm of the philosophy of science – more often than not, cherry picking will come back to haunt one.

The point of all this is to debunk Ankersmit's argument that he can supply definitive proof of his concept of narrative substances. In *Narrative Logic* Ankersmit 'attempted to use an outmoded language of proof ... that is to say he brought with him into his proof a worn out, died-into-literality, old language of outmoded styles of generally positivist philosophies, the character of which provoked a form of narrative contradiction that undermined the books coherence a matter which went pretty much unnoticed by its [four] critics' (p. 48). We then get more metaphysical speculation: 'can any theory be really proved in an absolute sense?' (p. 48). No – but then most scientists/ historians will quite happily settle for a standard of proof less severe than absolute proof. The remainder of the chapter is fortunately upon much firmer ground, as Icke details some of the other contradictions in *Narrative Logic*, such as Ankersmit's interpretations of Hayden White, and his concept of the 'experimental garden'. Indeed, Icke returns to Ankersmit's theoretical relationship with White on several occasions, concluding that if we take out all of the 'bad' bits from *Narrative Logic*, then essentially we are left with an 'abridged description' of *Metahistory* (p. 63). Although Ankersmit wants to distance himself from White's position, Icke is not convinced that he managed to achieve it. Indeed, could 'Ankersmit's misreadings, the irregularities in his arguments and so on, be symptomatic of a kind of paranoia, an all-consuming desire to separate himself from White or, perhaps one might even say, "the spectre of White"?' (pp 64–5). The implication here is clear – Ankersmit is being upbraided for trying to keep historical writing on some sort of epistemological footing, instead of letting go and following White down the path of formalist literary theory.

When postmodernists try to co-opt Ankersmit into their camp, they tend to quote approvingly Ankersmit's exchanges with Perez Zagorin in the pages of *History & Theory* at the turn of the 1990s.⁽⁴⁾ Yet as Icke correctly notes, Ankersmit was never fully at ease with having been cast as the champion of postmodernism/textualism. Indeed, Ankersmit's trajectory in the 20 years after *Narrative Logic* would be away from history and towards the area of memory studies addressed in his 2005 work *Sublime Historical Experience*. This shift of course, 'precipitates his fall from the *good* to the *lost* Ankersmit that constitutes this books central theme' (p. 68). The link between the two Ankersmit's is his 1994 collection of essays *History and Tropology*. Once again, the figure of Hayden White is brought to the forefront, specifically Ankersmit's misreading of him. In the introduction to *History and Tropology* Ankersmit characterises White as taking upon himself in *Metahistory* the task of 'educating historians to the extent that they might perceive the difference between, on one hand, a reality which is in principle actually *accessible* to historians, and on the other, their own 'intellectual constructions' which constituted within the discourse of history itself and form a barrier to the perception of an otherwise *accessible* reality' (p. 71).

On Icke's reading of White however, the point of *Metahistory* was to highlight 'the hopelessness of the modernist historian's evident task – to find some sort of meaning, direction, purpose and so on, in a vanished past – a past which can no longer be directly perceived...' (p. 73). Icke reiterates the argument that Ankersmit's work is fuelled by an obsession with White – apparently, it was 'Ankersmit's misfortune (one of timing) that he arrived on the field of historical theory only to find that it had already been comprehensively 'staked out' by White...' (p. 76). The point of working through Ankersmit's misreading of White is to illustrate that the latter's arguments 'are problematic because they are handicapped by a lack of internal coherence which arises out of contradictions, misreading's misunderstandings, category errors and so on' (p. 81). To sum up then, Ankersmit argued that White's thought had evolved between the publication of *Metahistory* and 1987's *The Content of the Form*, an evolution that mirrored his own changing views. Specifically, both had moved from language to the sublime, via a rejection of tropology. However, White remained trapped in a Kantian, transcendentalist mode of thought, which Ankersmit had been able to avoid. So what changed in Ankersmit's own philosophy after *Narrative Logic*? Icke argues that in *Narrative Logic* there was a tension between relativist position and a foundationalist position. Ankersmit could not bring himself to relinquish this foundationalism like a good postmodernist, and so in *History & Tropology* argued for 'a rejection of tropology and Kantian transcendentalism in exchange for his own idiosyncratic quasi-Romantic perception of the sublime' (p. 98). Ankersmit wanted to grasp the past-in-itself and to do so, he argued that Kantian transcendentalism was primarily a theory of how experience is transformed into knowledge – ergo, historical experience must be the historian's point of departure.

The remainder of the book deals with Ankersmit's 2005 work *Sublime Historical Experience*. On Icke's reading, Ankersmit attempts to 'develop an alternative theory of history capable of providing an unmediated and thus *direct* entry into a real and authentic experiential relationship with the past' (p. 135). For Ankersmit, the French Revolution brought about a profound change in Western civilisation, and this is his paradigm case for his theory of sublime historical experience. Ultimately, the revolution was a painful experience, a pain which lingered on after the event as a constant presence – and this is the essence 'which historians are presumed to connect with when experiencing the historical sublime; an experience which, Ankersmit insists, can only come out of the trauma of loss' (p. 136). Furthermore, in order to obtain a historical consciousness in the first place, a civilisation/ culture needs to go through a traumatic cultural experience. Only when a civilisation's past has been ripped away from its present, causing it to lose its bearings and face an uncertain collective future, does the process of historical change become apparent.⁽⁵⁾ One needs to think of such civilisations as a 'hybrid creature', a bundle of sensations, moods and feelings lacking a 'self' to tie them together. The presence of these pains and sensations articulate themselves through the minds of historians living within the various civilisations, thus providing the link between collective sublime historical experience and individual historical experience.

For Icke, the writing of *Sublime Historical Experience* 'could never have been anything but a doomed project', and unsurprisingly, the chapter is devoted to debunking the work (p. 104). There is a fairly ironic moment at one point when Icke chides Ankersmit for not addressing work by several postmodernist thinkers that tells against his thesis, when Icke himself might be accused of playing fast and loose with the work of Donald Davidson in the current work. No doubt *Sublime Historical Experience* is a highly flawed work (hybrid creatures indeed); but it nonetheless represents a valiant attempt to move on from sterile debates about being unable to break out of the 'prison-house' of language. And in a sense there is an air of futility about Icke's exegesis of Ankersmit's failure to achieve what he sets out to do in *Sublime Historical Experience* – as a committed postmodernist, presumably there is nothing that any author could say that would convince him that the project of history is a valid enterprise. It is the classic postmodernist tactic of carping from the side-lines that the historical enterprise is doomed from the start due to *a priori* reasons, instead of undertaking task of trying to make a *positive* contribution to historical epistemology.⁽⁶⁾

I want to engage for a moment with the notion that we cannot gain access to an unmediated past from my own experience in the philosophy of science. Icke quotes Martin Davies/ George Steiner to the effect that the past is thinkable and knowable only through the current semiotic or symbolic system – history in the human sense is a language net cast backwards. (p. 139) The inference seems to be that language provides an

inescapable conceptual scheme which must inevitably circumscribe how we view historical evidence, or the remains of the-past-in-itself. Therefore, unmediated access to the past itself is impossible. But the fact that we cannot gain *unmediated* access to the past does not mean that we cannot find out anything about it *at all*. Indeed, Thomas Kuhn has argued that the study of science is impossible without resort to some kind of conceptual scheme, which narrows the scientists' field of vision in order that he/she may examine a specific area in a level of detail which would otherwise be impossible.⁽⁷⁾ Indeed, as noted earlier, many philosophers of science are now arguing for something like anti-representationalist theory of objectivity, or at the very least, a modest form of realism. Herein lies one of the problems with postmodernist historical theorists – the pendulum swings from one extreme to the other. Historians are attributed with striving for a hard version of epistemic realism; a position which is then rejected, and the conclusion is drawn that all that is left is an equally extreme constructivism. As William Child, writing about Davidson's moderate realism points out, 'the realists' claim that some [conceptual] classifications are more natural than others need not appeal to Archimedean points or the imagined comparisons between them'.⁽⁸⁾

Anyone who has followed Frank Ankersmit's work will also note that Icke performs a sleight of hand in his examination of Ankersmit's work, moving straight from *History & Tropology* to *Sublime Historical Experience*. Why does he avoid critiquing 2001's *Historical Representation*? Perhaps it centres around the fact that in the book Ankersmit is not so much critical of postmodernism as dismissive of it.

Deconstructivism, 'with its alleged fascination for subversion, irrationality and inconsistency ... is no real threat'.⁽⁹⁾ Indeed, Ankersmit tries to assimilate the useful aspects of the linguistic turn to the current body of historical theory, something which postmodernists generally loathe – postmodernist theory is something that cannot be assimilated, it must be adopted wholesale. As stated earlier, with its references to things like 'hybrid creatures', *Sublime Historical Experience* is a fairly easy target. But *Historical Representation* is a much tougher nut to crack – combining as it does various aspects of literary theory while still maintaining that historians do have some degree of access to the past they write about.

What are we to make then, of *Frank Ankersmit's Lost Historical Cause*? One's initial reaction is that Icke remains firmly under the influence of his supervisor – there is not much here that would look out of place in a work by Keith Jenkins. The pervading tone of the book seems to be one of disappointment; Ankersmit had the chance to join Hayden White as one of the heroes of postmodernist historians, but owing to his inability to let go of such foolish notions about being able to access the 'past-in-itself', failed to fulfil his early potential. We can only, it seems, look back at parts of *Narrative Logic* and wistfully wonder what might have been. It is the Jenkinsian view of history *par excellence*. It is also a confusing book in terms of its structure. At its heart there seems to be a journal article about the theoretical relationship between Hayden White and Ankersmit struggling to get out – or at least, one about how Ankersmit has misread White. But this is a sin that cannot merely be tackled within the pages of *Rethinking History*, hence perhaps, the attempt to expand it into a book length work. But as a 150 or so page book Icke seems to make awfully heavy weather of what is on the face of it a fairly simple and straightforward thesis.

Ultimately, the problem with this work is not so much that Icke tries to critique Ankersmit's work; but the he tries to do so in terms of all the tired old postmodernist clichés that the historical profession has by-and-large decided should be consigned to history itself. It is not surprising that Icke takes issue with Michael Roth's assessment that the 'massive tide' of language has now receded – to admit so would signal the death of the postmodernist enterprise. Icke's reference to memory studies also raises an eyebrow. To my mind, it could be argued that the real revolution over the past 40 years or so in historical theory has not been postmodernism, but rather the growth of memory studies. Interestingly, Icke tries to co-opt memory studies in to the postmodernist camp by arguing it is something that may replace history, and indeed, 'reflects a growing discontent with current academic history' (p. 149). It also interesting to note that when comparing Ankersmit's ideas with those of White, White's work is presented entirely uncritically – but then, as the gospel of postmodernist history this is perhaps no surprise. Icke's mastery of the works of Ankersmit and White is second to none, but the conclusions he draws from his readings let him down. The general consensus in historical theory is that the linguistic turn is over. This tome, along with a couple of other recent books, seems to me to signify the attempt to flog some semblance of life into a horse that has recently

been pronounced as extinct. More than one historical theorist has remarked in the last few years that we are now in the post-postmodernist period of historical theory – hadn't someone better tell the postmodernists?

Notes

1. It should also be pointed out that what we might call 'traditional' historical theorist have also tended to lump Ankersmit in with postmodernists – for example Richard Evans and C. B. McCullagh.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. With regards to Hesse, she actually argued that it is fairly straightforward to establish conditions for realism – it is always possible to translate a large number of the statements of an earlier theory into the statements of its successor, and this can also be done on a conceptual level. See Brendan Minogue, 'Realism and intensional reference', *Philosophy of Science*, 45 (1978), 446. We might also point out that Ankersmit himself argued that although the idea of metaphor is essential in the philosophy of history, it actually helps us to obtain a correct picture of the past, as opposed to obfuscating it. See Ankersmit, 'The dialectics of narrativist historicism', in *Historical Representation* (Palo Alto, 2001), pp. 138–9.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Admittedly this is one thing that Davidson has argued against – see his 'On the very idea of a conceptual scheme'. He does however, argue against the idea that we impose structure on an intrinsically structureless world – which is the position of Hayden White, and one I assume Icke agrees with (p. 50). For Davidson's idea on taxonomies and natural kinds, see William Child, 'Triangulation: Davidson, realism and natural kinds', *Dialectica*, 55, (2001), 29–49. For a move towards a non-representational theory of objectivity, see Joseph Bernardoni, *Knowing Nature without Mirrors: Thomas Kuhn's Antirepresentationalist Objectivity* (Saarbrücken, 2009).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Ankersmit, 'Historiography and postmodernism', *History & Theory*, 28 (1989), 137–53; Perez Zagorin, 'Historiography and postmodernism: reconsiderations', *History & Theory*, 29 (1990), 263–74.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. A similar argument was recently made by Zachary Schiffman – the 'past' as a concept only originated in the Enlightenment with the birth of anachronism. See Schiffman, *The Birth of the Past* (Cambridge, 2011).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. As Bernard Waites puts it, if Keith 'Jenkins wants to persuade a generally sceptical academy of the virtues of the radical history he envisages, then his best strategy would be to write some'. Bernard Waites, 'In defence of historical realism; a further response to Keith Jenkins', *Rethinking History*, 15 (2011), 332–3.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Indeed, I believe Kuhn and Davidson would both agree that although there are no algorithms for choosing one conceptual scheme over another, once we do choose a scheme/ paradigm, then the world *itself* will determine how the theory works from hereon in.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Childs, p. 38.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Frank Ankersmit, 'The linguistic turn', in *Historical Representation*, p 70.[Back to \(9\)](#)

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