

Peter P. Icke: *Frank Ankersmit's Lost Historical Cause: A Journey
from Language to Experience*
New York: Routledge 2012, 198 pages

Although Peter Icke's book is probably the first book-length treatment of the views of Frank Ankersmit published in English, it does not offer a comprehensive interpretation of his works. It rather attempts to explain and criticize one specific aspect of Ankersmit's development – his route from narrativism to the topic of sublime historical experience (his move or “journey from language to experience”). However, even this evolution is presented from a very specific perspective. The result is a strange book. On the one hand, I must admit that it occasionally contains compelling analyses, interesting points and criticisms. Therefore, the reader will not read this work in vain if she is interested in perplexing issues discussed in contemporary philosophy of history. On the other hand, the main argument of the book is, to put it mildly, unbelievable. During more critical moments I would even say it is bizarre. But let me try to avoid a strong rhetoric – by the way, a notable feature of Icke's writing – and make my point in a more constructive manner. After a few introductory and selective remarks about Ankersmit and Icke's book I focus on the main argument provided by Icke. I try to show that his so-called secondary explanation of Ankersmit's route is misguided and incoherent with what Icke himself says in some other places of the book. Moreover, his primary explanation is shallow and not illuminating at all.

Frank Ankersmit is a Dutch theorist of history, one of the most original and prolific authors in this discipline. He is usually associated with the so-called narrativism or narrativist philosophy of history defending a constructivist or antirealist account of history (the discipline, not the past). Narrativism opposes the view that historical works provide straightforward depictions of past events: it rather underlines that they are complicated constructions determined by various factors. Some narrativists emphasize the role of linguistic or conceptual tools, others point to the inescapability of literary dimension, narrative structure, ideological influence or, in general, a historian's point of view. Ankersmit presented his narrativist claims in many books and papers. His main points could be found in his *Narrative Logic* (1983), but similar views are developed also in his later works *History and Tropology* (1994), *Historical Repre-*

sentation (2001) and in his most recent *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* (2012).

An interesting thing happened when Ankersmit, usually emphasizing the indirect and constructed nature of historical knowledge, started to write about some kind of direct experience with the past, most notably in his *Sublime Historical Experience* (2005). This route from *Narrative Logic* (putting forward narrativist or constructivist views) to *Sublime Historical Experience* (supposedly presenting ideas incompatible with narrativism) is the main topic of Peter Icke's book. Obviously, this is a surprising development worth of attention and explanation. Should the views about sublime historical experience be understood as supplementing his previous narrativism? Or should they be conceived as replacing and opposing constructivism about historical work? This is the context of Icke's attempt to explain *why* Ankersmit makes a move – in fact, by Icke's lights a wrong move – from narrativism to the notion of sublime historical experience.

Frank Ankersmit's Lost Historical Cause is a revised version of Icke's dissertation supervised by Keith Jenkins, a well-known advocate of postmodern philosophy of history.¹ Icke similarly favors postmodernism and thus, not surprisingly, he concurs with the narrativist conclusions of Ankersmit, which may be utilized in some way also for the goals of postmodernism, and disapproves of Ankersmit's views about sublime historical experience, which go against what is so dear for postmodernists.²

The book itself is divided into an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter, "The Good Ankersmit", provides an insightful analysis of the main pillars of *Narrative Logic* accompanied with a short discussion of its reception. Nevertheless, after this quite favorable account of Ankersmit's conclusions Icke formulates his objections. In the second and the third chapter, "A Moment of Hesitation" and "Ankersmit in Transition", the author outlines certain doubts about some features of Ankersmit's work, he introduces the claim that Ankersmit misinterprets Hayden White (the key figure of narrativism) and the author presents his main argument. The last chapter, "Sublime

¹ Actually, Jenkins played an important role in presenting Ankersmit of *Narrative Logic* and "Six Theses on Narrativist Philosophy of History" as a prominent postmodern philosopher of history. Not necessarily a helpful step for his reputation among those who either did not really read his work, interpreted it in a radical way, or read only some of his papers from the late 1980s and the early 1990s discussing postmodernism.

² For more on Icke's postmodernism, see the review of the book written by Adam Timmins (Timmins 2012).

Historical Experience”, concentrates on a detailed exposition and critique of the issue of experience.

In this review I am not going to discuss all notable points Icke makes about history or Ankersmit. I have to admit that the first chapter contains a clear and pertinent summary of Ankersmit’s narrativism and, generally, the book raises a couple of interesting questions and criticisms (e.g., regarding the relation of language and history or language and experience). However, Icke’s main argument is highly unsettling and this is why I focus on the core of the book (mainly chapters two and three) providing the alleged explanation of Ankersmit’s route from narrativism (language) to sublime historical experience.

So how should we understand Ankersmit’s somewhat surprising move? In a nutshell, Icke gives the following story. In 1960s and 1970s Hayden White presents the crucial tenets of the narrativist critique of history. Thus, when Ankersmit publishes his *Narrative Logic* in 1983, the important part of narrativism has already been formulated. Ankersmit may merely repeat what has already been written or develop some minor points. Realizing this, Ankersmit begins to dissociate himself from White by misinterpreting White’s position. This enables him to criticize White and to articulate his own new points about history. Finally, the topic of sublime historical experience helps Ankersmit to distance himself from White, narrativism and to obtain a stature of an original theorist of history.

This is a simplified version of Icke’s account, seemingly explaining why Ankersmit makes a journey from *narrativism* to *sublime*. In fact, Icke’s argument is a bit more complicated and it is much more rhetorically loaded; he speaks of Ankersmit’s paranoia, of his being haunted by White, etc. However, I believe that the above story states the core of Icke’s account and I may document it by several quotes. For instance, at the end of chapter two the author writes:

Could Ankersmit’s misreadings [of White], 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’? Well, I think that it probably could, and this theme of detachment... will run as a continuous thread into and right through my next “bridging” chapter. (pp. 64-65)

And he points in the same direction on several occasions in the third chapter:

Long before Ankersmit’s intervention in the field of historical theory, White’s language-informed style of historical theory was largely com-

pleted and comprehensively “wrapped up” to the extent that there was little space left for any improvements on it. ... hence, Ankersmit found himself unable to make any significant and original contributions to narrativist historical theory during a *crucial* stage in its development. All he could do was to develop and promote what was already there and that, it could be argued, was not enough for him. (p. 101)

... Ankersmit found himself compelled (psychologically) to leave [White] behind. ... Accordingly, perhaps sub-consciously, this resolute dismissal of White affected/effected Ankersmit’s description/redescription of White’s position such that it might fall to his own arguments. On this reading White becomes Ankersmit’s *bête noire* or haunting which he is driven to exorcise by whatever means he can find. (pp. 101-102)

I put forward the proposition that the developing “shape” of Ankersmit’s new position might be seen to be driven by a kind of paranoia, a compulsion to detach and distance his own work from that of the *spectral* Hayden White. ... And indeed, as I have already argued, in terms of substantial theory Ankersmit had little new to offer at that time... It is, therefore, not surprising that Ankersmit’s aspiration to improve on White’s position by actually grasping the past “plain” (unmediated) [via the notion of experience] involved a move away from “Whi-tean” theory which, it seems to me, denied the viability of such an exercise. (pp. 75-76)

To be fair, I must note that at the end of chapter three Icke says that it is “a rather speculative secondary explanation” (p. 101). However, I regard it as the actual core of his explanation because he *repeatedly* alludes to it and it seems, in fact, that *this* (and not what he calls “primary explanation”) is the base of his account. Moreover, his so-called “primary explanation” is just too shallow to explain anything (more on this later).

What is wrong with Icke’s (secondary) explanation? First of all, he seems to give us a very simplistic and vulgar sort of explanation alluding to mental states. In other words, he constructs his account in such a way that the mental states of Ankersmit are assigned the decisive explanatory role. Sometimes it looks the author refers to explicit intentions (Ankersmit’s “*desire* to separate himself from White”; for Ankersmit it is “not enough” to develop the points of others), but he also seems to make use of sub-conscious mental states (Ankersmit “found himself compelled... perhaps sub-consciously”; he was driven by

a “compulsion”). Personally, I am very skeptical about the plausibility of explanations referring to mental states in such a crude fashion. How was the author able to uncover the alleged intentions or even sub-conscious mental states of Ankersmit? Icke does not indicate any methodology to clarify how to discover a person’s real mental states.³ He simply seems to declare “out of the blue” that Ankersmit is “driven by a kind of paranoia” or by “an all-consuming desire to separate himself from White”. What is more, Icke’s (secondary) explanation is a bit insulting. For it does not focus on a larger context of Ankersmit’s route to sublime experience, it does not concentrate on the issues the move attempted to deal with. It rather reaches for some of the most simplistic motives one can imagine in the scholarly world and proclaims them to clarify a puzzling move in the thought of one of the most prominent philosophers of history of our time.⁴

Second, Icke’s (secondary) explanation is undermined or even contradicted by other things he says in the book. Two of Icke’s main premises seem to be: (1) Ankersmit is not an original narrator but he is merely following White. (2) Ankersmit wants to distance himself from White (narrativism) in order to formulate something original (sublime historical experience). Only based on these assumptions, the author is able to conclude that Ankersmit moves from narrativism to experience. I am not sure what Icke considers to be an original, new or significant contribution to the theory of history, yet it is obvious from the book that he takes White to be an original author. I am not going to dispute this claim, because I believe White’s points are very interesting and they made a significant impact in the discipline. Still, I must ask: Was he the *first* to claim certain constructedness of historical knowledge or the *first* to point to literary aspects of historical works? What about some of the authors from the 19th century White himself likes to discuss or such philosophers as Arthur

³ Moreover, this discovery of real mental states does not seem to fit well with Icke’s postmodern stance. He writes: “Now, because on this view 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*” (p. 42). Hence, should we read Icke as simply giving us his own metaphor, his personal rhetorical exercise? If so, why doesn’t he say it openly but rather pretends to be able to see right into Ankersmit’s mind or even into his sub-consciousness?

⁴ I wonder what would be a reception of the book arguing that to explain, for instance, Wittgenstein’s route from *Tractatus* to *Philosophical Investigations* we should not focus on the issues Wittgenstein attempted to solve but rather on his mental states (e.g., on his desire to be famous or original).

Danto (narrative sentences) or Louis O. Mink (“stories are not lived but told”)? I think it is clear the issue of significance or originality is not the issue of who was the *first* to point to constructedness or literary dimension with respect to history. Therefore, White is rather significant in the sense that he comes up with ingenious points, notions, proposals or arguments developing these proposals. However, in this sense, also Ankersmit (with his notion of narrative substance, his distinctions between narratio and individual statement or representation and description, etc.) is an original philosopher with a remarkable impact on the discipline.⁵ And the important thing for my critique is that, contrary to his assumption (1), Icke, now and then, seems to admit it:

For while Ankersmit’s early arguments, broadly speaking, carried him toward some of the same general conclusions as those expressed by White..., he has nevertheless always been and undeniably remains original and complex in his own right. (p. 9; see also pp. 94-95, 103)

In addition, the author openly contradicts his assumption (1) when he offers the following reading of Ankersmit’s interpretation of White and his relation to Kantianism. As Icke reads it, Ankersmit acknowledges that he is following White in one aspect of his theory. Yet, Icke does not agree and he replies with a rather general claim (not indicating that it is limited to this one aspect!):

For broadly speaking I take the view that very little common ground has existed between the theoretical positions of Ankersmit and White since Ankersmit’s earlier development of his notion of the *narrative substance* and, hence, the idea that Ankersmit was really following White, is unconvincing. (p. 87)

So Icke himself undermines the “pillar” of his explanation when he claims there has been “very little common ground” between these two authors “since Ankersmit’s earlier development of his notion of the *narrative substance*”. How could Ankersmit repeat White’s points if there has been “very little common ground” between them?

The situation gets even worse for Icke with respect to his assumption (2). At one place the author says:

Pulling all these arguments together, one can perhaps now make out a certain direction in them. For it rather looks as if Ankersmit first pro-

⁵ Of course, one does not have to agree with his conclusions nor arguments, but this is a different thing.

jected onto White's theoretical position a duplicate of his own evolving position – that is, his own movement from *language* to the *sublime*, sanctioned through the rejection of *tropology* – and that having done so he was then able to retrieve that same reading from White's texts as if it truly represented White's own position. (p. 92)

Recall that Icke's explanation presupposes and emphasizes that Ankersmit strives to be original and wants to distance himself from White. But now, when Ankersmit, according to Icke, approaches originality with the topic of sublime experience, he allegedly "projects it onto White's theoretical position". This does not make any sense. Why would a person who, according to Icke, is eager to come up with a new contribution first attribute it to somebody else? In sum, I do not even need to analyze the work of Ankersmit and White to discredit Icke's implausible secondary explanation: Icke's own claims ruin his argument.

Finally, what is Icke's primary explanation of Ankersmit's move from language to experience? Icke repeatedly informs us that Ankersmit "has always harboured a deep-seated need to retrieve the past in some real, authentic form" (p. 102); "he desperately wanted and needed some form of authentic access to the past" (p. 103). Yet, since the path through history (narrativism) is blocked, Ankersmit has to take a different route – via experience. To put it briefly, Icke's primary explanation tells us that Ankersmit turns to the topic of experience and direct relation with the past because he *wants* and *needs* such a direct access. But this is a very shallow type of explanation. Following this pattern, one would explain any "Why X?" by responding: "Because she or he *wants* and *needs* X?" or, to use a more picturesque but just as uninformative language: "Because of his 'personal drive to satisfy his central and compelling need' (p. 104) for X".

I realize that Icke's book offers more than just the primary and secondary explanation of Ankersmit's journey from language to experience. Therefore, those who are interested in contemporary philosophy of history (more specifically, in the views of Ankersmit or in the relation between language and the past or language and experience) should read it. Nevertheless, they should scrutinize very carefully the main point of the work, the alleged explanations of Ankersmit's move. In my opinion, the primary explanation is too shallow and the other one – besides being misguided – does not even fit some of Icke's own claims in the book.

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References

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Timothy Williamson: *Modal Logic as Metaphysics* Oxford University Press 2013, 464 pages

What there is, what there might be and what there cannot be? Are some things merely possible, could events in the world be otherwise, do past and future situations exist in the same manner as those present do? Questions like these have been bothering philosophers for ages and still stand in the very core of metaphysical debates. However, purely metaphysical considerations like the above ones very often terminated in conceptual confusions. They turned out to be more confusing than elucidating, more obscure than clear, and sadly, more pseudophilosophical than philosophical. In his new book, Timothy Williamson breaks the barriers. His *Modal Logic as Metaphysics* gives some precise connections between the model theory and the metaphysics and aims to put metaphysics on the same level as science.

In eight chapters (Contingentism and Necessitism; The Barcan Formula and its Converse: Early Developments; Possible Worlds Model Theory; Predication and Modality; From First-Order to Higher-Order Modal Logic; Intensional Comprehension Principles and Metaphysics; Mappings between Contingentist and Necessitist Discourse; Consequences of Necessitism and Methodological Afterword) Williamson argues for the claim that one of the roles of quantified modal logic is to supply a central structural core to theories of modal metaphysics. Williamson provides various highly technical arguments, all of which are based on strong modal logic as the arbiter in theory choice. He proposes to look at metaphysical problems through the prism of normal scientific standards, namely through the strongest and systematic logical theories. It is