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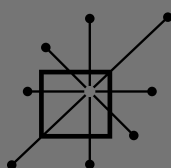
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Theorizing Missed the Linguistic Turn





Humpty Dumpty Historiography: How Historical Theorizing Missed the Linguistic Turn

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**Abstract**

The phrase “the linguistic turn” owes much of its currency in and out of historiography either to Richard Rorty’s classic 1967 anthology or John Toews’ much cited 1987 essay, each of which employs that term in their respective titles. Within historical theory particular significance has been attributed to Toews’ essay for its role in identifying a singular theoretical moment. The pervasive theoretical influence attributed to “the linguistic turn” and the role of this specific essay in heralding that moment remains undiminished. Yet despite all this attention, an important thematic connection between the two works has been missed. As a result, the most basic problem raised by the linguistic turn remains unacknowledged, hence undiscussed, and so unresolved. To appreciate why requires revisiting issues actually raised under the rubric of “the linguistic turn” and so making clear the deep thematic connections between Rorty’s anthology and Toews’ essay.

Keywords

Linguistic Turn; Historiography; Theory of History.



Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again
(Traditional English Children's Song)

The phrase “the linguistic turn” owes much of its currency in and out of historiography either to Richard Rorty’s classic 1967 anthology or John Toews’ much cited 1987 essay, each of which employs that term in their respective titles. Within historical theory particular significance has been attributed to Toews’ essay for its role in identifying a singular theoretical moment. “In 1987, the publication in the *American Historical Review* of John Toews’ review essay, ‘Intellectual history after the linguistic turn: the autonomy of meaning and the irreducibility of experience,’ marked a decisive moment in the development of Anglo-American historiography” (Stein, 2013, p. 136). The pervasive theoretical influence attributed to “the linguistic turn” and the role of this specific essay in heralding that moment remains undiminished. (For evidence that this remains the “received reading” of Toews, see (Partner, 2022, p. 332) and (Bouton, 2022, p. 535-6). Yet despite all this attention, an important thematic connection between the two works has been missed. As a result, the most basic problem raised by the linguistic turn remains unacknowledged, hence undiscussed, and so unresolved. This oversight effectively eviscerates and trivializes most historical theorizing.

To appreciate why requires revisiting issues actually raised under the rubric of “the linguistic turn” and so making clear the deep thematic connections between Rorty’s anthology and Toews’ essay. Neither Rorty nor Toews ever suggest that the definite article in the phrase be understood as functioning to reference a single, univocal position. To the contrary, both take pains to point out the heterodox quality of thinkers and writings included in their respective surveys. Most importantly, both emphasize in addition the importance of what I shall term a “meta-theoretical” aspect in their respective discussions of the linguistic turn. And in each case it has been precisely this meta-theoretical concern that has gone unnoticed and undiscussed. In the sense to be specified below, theorists in history certainly have not moved beyond that turn.

What issues did the linguistic turn highlight? In Rorty’s case, his volume showcases a broad-ranging *metaphilosophical* debate, i.e., one about how philosophy *ought* to be done. To do this, he collects under a single cover philosophers who share no more in common than the fact that they all turn up in Rorty’s anthology. Some sense of the artifice of Rorty’s oft cited title can



be gleaned by considering a remark by Gustav Bergmann included in that anthology, given that Bergmann is the thinker credited with coining that phrase. “What precisely the linguistic turn is or... how to execute it properly is controversial. That it must be executed... is common doctrine” (Bergmann, 1967, p. 64). But somewhat ironically, while that quote appears in an essay Bergmann first published in 1953, a large majority of the other essays in Rorty’s volume come later and differ entirely from the position that Bergmann *circa* 1953 defends. But Rorty’s anthology by and large catalogues disagreements regarding what the correct method for doing philosophy happens to be. It is however Rorty, with his characteristic concern for metaphilosophical twists and turns, who for his own purposes finds a thematic unity in the essays he gathers together.¹

Rorty’s introductory comments for this reason provides critical clues to the perceived intellectual stakes as well as a characteristically ironic Rortyan assessment of the metatheoretical fashion *du jour*. “Ever since Plato invented the subject, philosophers have been in a state of tension produced by the pull of the arts on one side and the pull of the sciences on the other. The linguistic turn has not lessened this tension, although it has enabled us to be considerably more self-conscious about it. The chief value of the metaphilosophical discussions included in this volume is that they serve to heighten this self-consciousness” (Rorty, 1967, 38). To appreciate why the phrase migrates into Toews’ discussion can be revealed by transposing disciplinary references and so varying a bit this quote as follows. “Ever since Herodotus invented the subject, historians have been in a state of tension produced by the pull of the arts on one side and the pull of the sciences on the other. The linguistic turn has not lessened this tension, although it has enabled historians to be considerably more self-conscious about it. The chief value of the metahistorical discussions included in this journal is that they serve to heighten this self-consciousness.” In short, the question underlying the intellectual *angst* and on-going navel-gazing one finds in disciplines such as philosophy and history - in short, what animates often enough one or another call for a turn in each - is simply the old chestnut: Are they arts or sciences?

The force of that question resides in the thought that a discipline cannot be both, a “cognitive dichotomy” that links directly to what I have elsewhere termed the “positivist trap” into which historical theory fell following Hayden White and in which it still remains caught².

¹ Rorty’s anthology collects a heterogenous group of authors whose assessments of what counts as “the linguistic turn” markedly differ in interesting ways, disagreeing *inter alia* even on the conception of linguistic at issue (ideal? ordinary?) and who are not of one mind regarding the need for or efficacy of any such turn. As the phrase migrates into a discipline such as history, the point of emphasis regarding language shifts markedly and focuses instead on historicizing meaning. What connects the two discussions, however, concerns an ever-weakening grip on what to count as stable or real. Partner (2022) survey indicates that debate has not much changed since the Toews article.

² See Roth, 2025.



For purposes of this essay, however, the only conceptual freight carried by the term 'science' involves making explicit the most generic set of epistemic norms taken to *rationaly* legitimate knowledge claims in a discipline. An ability to claim the mantel of science in this generic sense signals an ability to provide a methodological license to claims made to lay bare whatever reality one imagines lurking behind or beyond superficial appearances.

This specific worry about *legitimation* of knowledge claims directly influences, or so I shall argue, why Toews appropriates the phrase. This concern may not be immediately obvious, since Toews nowhere cites Rorty's 1967 volume. But closer inspection reveals that the same basic meta-methodological concerns animate each of their works³. This commonality can best be appreciated by initially approaching the interconnections between Rorty's anthology and Toews' survey essay indirectly. For the most fundamental concern one finds in each, and one unconnected to any specific account of representation, involves problems related to trying to answer the "art or science?" question.

To do so requires developing an account of just what *rationaly* justifies one set of claims as opposed to others. Efforts to represent reality of any sort should fail to impress unless one also has justified claims about how to distinguish between mask and reality, and so an approved meta-method for discerning which is which. Lest this seems too far-fetched or idiosyncratic a suggestion as a motivation, consider the following observation from a leading scholar of historical theory. "Surveying the battleground of definitions of history outlined above can lead to only one conclusion, and this is that there is not even the slightest appearance of an agreement among historians about the object of their research, about its method, or about its '*scientific*' credentials *vis-a`-vis* the social sciences" (Lorenz, 2011, p. 19). This challenge simply reiterates long-standing questions regarding history's status as a legitimate science (For a succinct overview, see Clark, 2004).

Rorty understands this point quite well, and it guides how he introduces and selects the excerpts in *The Linguistic Turn*. "Attempts to substitute knowledge for opinion are constantly thwarted by the fact that what *counts* as philosophical knowledge seems itself to be a matter of opinion" (Rorty, 1967, p. 2). Many of the "classic statements" that Rorty identifies as heralding the linguistic turn reflect the desire for tying modes of representation more closely to scientific method. One famous representational strategy he catalogs proposed that the royal road to scientific philosophy required "proper" analyses of logical structure. Connecting philosophical analysis

³ The phrase "the linguistic turn" by now taken on a life of its own. And in this regard, it should be noted that Rorty's introductory essay has on occasion been misread as vindictory of the so-called linguistic turn in philosophical method. It is not (See, e.g., Roth, 2021).



to formal logic meant to put to rest skepticism about the scientific credentials of philosophical analysis by piggybacking on the scientific legitimacy ceded to mathematics. Philosophers tended to emphasize these logical and semantic dimension - e.g., analyses of meaning in terms of logically excavated truth conditions - as the best-case treatment of meaning until repeated assaults by Wittgensteinians, Quineans, Sellarsians, and Davidsonians made it too tendentious to do so. The second half of Rorty's anthology largely consists of essays by those who reject the type of representational aspirations that motivated early philosophical advocates of the linguistic turn.

Theorists in history promoted representational claims while still adhering to narrative form. Appropriately rigorous methods of certifying and validating various sources, e.g., archival material, were thought to secure scientific authority and so claims to represent the past as it was. But the thought that the meaning of various documents etc. could be more or less unproblematically ascertained succumbed to repeated assaults, first by Hayden White and subsequently by Foucauldians, Derridians, and assorted post-modernists. But even putting aside such sophisticated hecklers, other works by historians on historians (e.g., Novick 1987), gave lie to the belief that one could unproblematically presume on history as reliably mirroring pastness⁴. The sense of the 'linguistic turn' in this case thus also moved from identifying modes of securing claims to representation to strategies for questioning whose "reality" any narrative represents.

So in each disciplinary case, the linguistic turn was simultaneously a meta-theoretic move. Yet even as the connotation of the "the linguistic turn" swings in each discipline from a method for securing to one for destabilizing representational claims, the meta-methodological concern remains studiously ignored.

What then happened to any hopes in each discipline for attaining scientific status for their claims, i.e., for achieving consensus about what counts as rational justification? Those hopes

⁴ I am not the first to notice some of the strange ways that narrativism and positivism prove to be joined at the hip. As Chris Lorenz astutely observed some time back, "By inverting empiricism, however, both White and Ankersmit have at the same time retained it instead of rejecting it. This inverted empiricism fulfills a crucial function in metaphorical narrativism because the plausibility of the fundamental theses on the fictionality of narrativity is completely dependent on its implicit contrast with empiricism" (Lorenz, 1998, p. 314). That is, absent an implied embrace of knowledge as a form of mirroring, I take Lorenz to be saying that it becomes quite unclear what narrativism means to critique as well as how to assess the alternative it supposedly provides. This of course leaves unresolved, as Lorenz explicitly recognizes, the vexed question of how then to evaluate historical narratives from an epistemic standpoint. What norms determine which narrative it would be rational to believe? Here, perhaps, an important difference emerges between Lorenz and myself. Lorenz emphasizes the importance of truth claims of narratives, which prioritizes assertions regarding factuality, and so referential or ontological claims. (See, e.g., Lorenz 1998, 324ff.) Unreconstructed holists and anti-foundationalists like myself see other factors as providing the primary constraints and bases for evaluation. For details, see Roth, 2020 and Roth and Beatty, 2025.



disappear when the methods thought to secure scientific status fail. And what is actually on display in discussions of the linguistic turn as one finds it in Rorty circa 1967 and Toews circa 1987 in fact concerns how even this meta-aspiration has effectively been forever shattered.

Historiography's "Humpty-Dumpty moment" primarily results not from positivists scoffing about a lack of general laws or post-modernist attacks on master-narratives. Naivety about realist representational strategies has been put to rest. But this simply leaves unanswered, indeed unrecognized, the more general challenge of clarifying the actual form legitimating knowledge claims. Deeming narratives "rhetorical constructions" relabels the problem; it does not solve it⁵. And Toews, like Rorty, has just this more general worry in mind. For as he surveys the emerging theoretical scene, he is well aware of Rorty's later, more skeptical meta-philosophical views. For not only does Rorty co-edit one collection that Toews reviews in his 1987 article, but also Rorty proves to be a frequent focus in another volume that Toews reviews there (Hollinger's).

Indeed, Toews cites without dissent Hollinger's characterization of Kuhn and Rorty as "historian's philosophers" (Toews, p. 903). Hollinger does this because both relentlessly historicize positions within their respective fields. But most importantly Hollinger also pinpoints and summarizes a discomfort that emerges and ties to the general theme of Toews' review article, viz. that Kuhn and Rorty, each in their own way, derive lessons from historicizing that many historians would be loathe to accept. For as Toews notes, "while historians may be quite content to assume a radical historicist perspective on truth and value in their professional work, they may find themselves less content when the historicist rejection of a transcendental ground is asserted as a general philosophy and applies to their own activity as truth tellers and reconstructors of meaning, as well as to their everyday practice as cultural beings in need of cosmic supports for their ethical commitments" (Toews, p. 903). This does not represent some aside on his part but rather proves crucial to comprehending the underlying orientation Toews signals by incorporating in his title "the linguistic turn."

This becomes even clearer by noting that Toews begins his article by referencing an essay from several years earlier by the historian William Bouwsma, "Intellectual History in the 1980s: From History of Ideas to History of Meaning." Toews cites Bouwsma's article because Bouwsma heralds within intellectual history a "turn" that prefigures Toews' own discussion,

⁵ Although I will not discuss the issue further in this essay, it should be noted that some welcome the idea that logic/rationality represents just another trope, and should not be seen as having any particular relevance to historiography. "Historical argument takes itself out of the realm of science, even so mild a form of science as social science, and into the space of human life... Argument is always partial, always someone's argument, always a form of special pleading. It is rhetoric, no more and no less governed, and propelled by the maligned canons and figures that first formalized discourse two and a half millennia ago" (Kellner, 151).

viz., how intellectual history has shifted away from the treatment of ideas as having their own peculiar autonomy (e.g., Lovejoy's "unit ideas"; see Bouwsma, 1981, p. 282). Just as many of the philosophers collected by Rorty sought to anchor meaning in verification conditions revealed by logical analysis or careful study or "ordinary language", the tradition in intellectual history Toews sees as having run its course posited "meanings" or "ideas" as timeless units of analysis that, because fixed, could also serve a justificatory role.

Interestingly, while Hayden White receives only the briefest mention in Toews' article, his shadow looms large over Bouwsma's work. Although Bouwsma cites *Metahistory* only in passing and in a footnote (Bouwsma, 1981, p. 287, fn. 10), Bouwsma nonetheless offers a very Whitean sounding assessment of how he understands the main claim his essay promotes: the "human and social world with which historians are all, in one way or another, concerned, might be described as a vast rhetorical production" (Bouwsma, 1981, p. 290). He tellingly glosses "rhetorical production" as follows: "For the operations that bring this human world into existence in consciousness and endow it with meaning are comparable to such basic rhetorical transactions as division and comparison, or metonymy and metaphor... Because of the basic role of language at once in perception, thought, and social existence, linguistics seems - in the most literal sense - of fundamental importance for historians, as indeed for other social scientists" (Bouwsma, 1981, p. 290). Foregrounding linguistics foreshadows the linguistic turn.

Toews enhances this framing of his primary concern as a concern with the loss of previous forms of justification by citing in addition to Bouwsma Martin Jay's discussion of the Habermas-Gadamer debate, "Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn? Reflections on the Habermas-Gadamer Debate." Significantly, Jay in that essay ponders the significance of the historicizing of reasoning and so rehearses issues of the sort that Bouwsma explored regarding the treatment of meaning. And Jay's essay indeed works quite nicely in conjunction with Bouwsma's, for while Bouwsma focuses on the turn away from ideas as timeless units, Jay discusses how the notion of rationality as historicized proves to divide Habermas from Gadamer. Here, what passes for good reasoning threatens to become just one more "rhetorical transaction."

Indeed, Jay prefaces his discussion of Habermas and Gadamer by sketching a synoptic view of how language comes to be treated philosophically in the 20th century, citing in this context many of the thinkers collected in Rorty's anthology⁶. Having thus situated his own discussion, Jay then remarks on how Habermas, "like those in the ordinary language tradition... has speculated on the implications of the linguistic turn for social theory" (Jay, 1982, p. 92-3). The issue most

⁶ Jay does not cite Rorty's anthology, but he does reference Rorty's later famous meta-philosophical masterpiece, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, which takes up the issues broached by Rorty in 1967 (Jay, 1982, p. 86).



emphatically does not concern some subsidiary theoretical interest but puts at issue how to understand the nature and status of rationality.

Gadamer elevates the power of authority and tradition to a place in knowledge denied them ever since the Enlightenment, except by romantics and conservatives. For Gadamer, tradition furnishes the flow of ideas and assumptions within which we must stand; even reason, he argues, is encompassed by tradition, rather than superior to it. It was precisely on this issue that Habermas's quarrel with Gadamer was first joined in 1967. Although by no means a simple neoHegelian, Habermas was and remains anxious to retain Hegel's emphasis on rationality and his belief that history as a whole is potentially coherent (Jay, 1982, p. 98).

As Jay understands matters, Habermas defends a notion of reason that for all intents and purposes both acknowledges and yet looks to escape from full historicizing. And as was the case with Bouwsma, Jay explicitly acknowledges that the issues considered in linguistic guise trace back to the influence of Hayden White's work⁷ (Jay, 1982, p. 106).

More generally, then, the use of the phrase "linguistic turn" in all these cases indicates that the variety of "linguistic" theories on offer matters less than worries about erosion of standards previously taken to legitimate and structure *any* theoretical discussion. See, in particular, Jay's worried reflections at pp. 109-110. By thus framing his own essay in terms of the issues emphasized by both Bouwsma and Jay - challenges that arises when one grants that reasoning and ideas can be fully historicized - Toews too effectively centers his discussion on just those "meta" issues that concerned Rorty.

As Toews plausibly diagnoses the situation at that moment, historians step onto the slippery slope that ends with their sliding into what was to become the morass of post-modern theorizing simply by doing what comes naturally - in this case, historicizing the notion of meaning. What makes the seemingly mundane acknowledgement that everything has a history into a problem that threatens to be intractable occurs with the apparent erasure of any clear line between what to count as fact or experience - and so a constant independent of the social—and what to count as social, and so as influenced by a world apart from it.

⁷ Interestingly, and as with Toews, Jay acknowledges and yet resists the implications nascent in the full historicizing of the notion of meaning and so the dissolution of any principled boundary between the social and the experiential. "Although the boundaries between literary criticism and intellectual history need not be entirely dissolved, we have much to learn from our more theoretically self-conscious colleagues in that discipline" (Jay, 1982, p. 106).



In spite of these indications of continuing disagreement along familiar lines, one can also discern a new framework of questions, or a “problematic,” around which the discussions among intellectual historians are increasingly organized. Most seem ready to concede that language can no longer be construed as simply a medium, relatively or potentially transparent, for the representation or expression of a reality outside of itself and are willing to entertain seriously some form of semiological theory in which language is conceived of as a self-contained system of “signs” whose meanings are determined by their relations to each other, rather than by their relation to some “transcendental” or extralinguistic object or subject. Disputes arise from a concern for the implications of a commitment to a semiological theory of meaning in its extreme form. Such a commitment would seem to imply that language not only shapes experienced reality but constitutes it, that different languages create different, discontinuous, and incommensurable worlds, that the creation of meaning is impersonal, operating “behind the backs” of language users whose linguistic actions can merely exemplify the rules and procedures of languages they inhabit but do not control, that all specialized language usages in a culture (scientific, poetic, philosophical, historical) are similarly determined by and constitutive of their putative objects. Within this perspective, historiography would be reduced to a subsystem of linguistic signs constituting its object, “the past,” according to the rules pertaining in the “prisonhouse of language” inhabited by the historian (Toews, 1987, p. 881-82, emphasis added).

But once a lack of any principled distinction between the factual and the social has been forced upon the professional awareness of historians, the writing of history seemingly slips its mooring, i.e., threatens to lose what ties it to the world and determines what can be claimed.

Toews worries throughout his review about this specific problem. For, he speculates, an untoward consequence of placing the social and the experiential all in the same theoretical pile obscures the role that historians claim to play in charting the interaction between people and their environment over time. Transforming what counts as experience to just another form of the social threatens, that is, to trivialize the historian’s enterprise.

The tides of psychological and sociological reductionism seem to have been dammed and turned back. The history of meaning has successfully asserted the reality and autonomy of its object. At the same time, however, a new form of reductionism has become evident, the reduction of experience to the meanings that shape it. Along



with this possibility, a new form of intellectual hubris has emerged, the hubris of wordmakers who claim to be makers of reality (J. Toews, 1987, p. 906).

Without some way to undo the radical blurring of any line between fact and theory/experience and meaning, there exists nothing but an interplay of culturally freighted signifiers of various sorts - texts and contexts (see Roth, 2007, for a fuller discussion of this issue). All the world becomes a play.

It quickly became apparent that Toews had given voice to a shared worry. Not long after the publication of his essay, other theoretically attuned historians surveying the scene pick up and echo his concern. "This dissolution of the materiality of the sign, its ruptured relation to extralinguistic reality, is necessarily also the dissolution of history, since it denies the ability of language to "relate" to (or account for) any reality other than itself. History, the past, is simply a subsystem of linguistic signs, constituting its object according to the rules of the linguistic universe inhabited by the historian (Spiegel, 1990, p. 63). In another well-known review of the theoretical landscape just a few years after Spiegel's, John Zammito reiterates this bleak assessment. "Increased sophistication about contextualization and polyphony poses a second, more pervasive and profound methodological issue. By interpreting "reconstruction" as the historian's "rewriting" of the documentary "source", the revisionist impulse in New Historicism, and in intellectual history more widely, threatens to dissolve the distinction between fiction and factuality" (Zammito 1993, p. 797; Zammito, 2013 offers an even grimmer assessment). And as was the case with Toews and Spiegel before him, he identifies the core problem as a failure of "referentiality" (Zammito 1993, p. 802; see also p. 804), by which he means the supposed inability to distinguish between text and context, evidence and interpretation.

Fast forwarding two decades after the laments just noted, one finds how the issues originally at the core of discussions under the rubric the linguistic turn have been transformed and obscured. This can be seen quite clearly in Judith Surkis's puzzling assessment of "turn" talk in her 2012 piece, "When Was the Linguistic Turn? A Genealogy"⁸. On the one hand, she ostensibly seeks to both clarify and problematize the brouhaha associated with the linguistic turn. But on the other hand, her characterization ironically only highlights not only the persistence of the problem about which Toews *et al* worried, but also the failure post-Toews to now even appreciate the full import of the basic problem that he emphasized.

⁸ By 2005, even Spiegel speaks of the theoretical scene as having passed by the linguistic turn.



The unintended irony of her essay arises at least in part from a point already duly noted in the earlier essays by Toews, Spiegel, and Zammito as well as already explicit in Rorty's anthology. That is, while the phrase "the linguistic turn" never characterized some single vision, it did regularly highlight a specific meta-methodological concern. On the one hand, Surkis clearly acknowledges the ambiguity of what to count as "the linguistic turn." "As a look at some key texts in the adventure of this concept will show, it is difficult to clearly pinpoint a singular or coherent 'turn' as having taken place" (Surkis, 2012, p. 702). Yet, on the other hand, surprise comes in how she proceeds to reread the worries Toews surfaced. For here she proves oddly blind to the basic meta-theoretical debate that animates the discussions by Rorty and by Toews.

What does it mean to describe a historiographical moment as a turn? The reason for undertaking such a review is not to offer a more comprehensive narrative of the 'linguistic turn' . . . but rather to question the usefulness of the concept itself. . . In addition to being reductive and constraining, the temporality of turn talk presumes a supersession of one disciplinary trend by another. While a turn seems to signal innovation and renewal, its spatio-temporal logic more often than not entails foreclosure. By contrast, a genealogical counternarrative can keep multiple strains of critical interrogation open for the historiographical future (Surkis, 2012, p. 702).

None of the original worries about proof or legitimation ever surface in her account of this debate. Rather, she imagines that the label can best be understood as just a name for yet another passing methodological fancy, and indicative of an unhelpful tendency by historians to relentlessly use temporal categories and modes of periodizing discussions.

Surkis does recognize in passing that Toews takes semiotics to pose a threat to place of empirical research in the writing of history and so trivialize the historian's contribution to accounts of change. For she straightforwardly acknowledges that "Toews's account of the 'linguistic turn' is thus structured by a suspicion of what he views to be the dangerous excesses of textualism" (Surkis, 2012, p. 707), specifically one where, as Surkis quotes Toews, wordmakers "claim to be the makers of reality" (Surkis, p. 707, quoting Toews, p. 906). But her lack of understanding about the role assigned this issue in Toews' account becomes evident just a few pages after having cited Toews' worry about textualism. For she later remarks "Scott's and Sewell's essays thus worked in different directions. But what their arguments shared—in contrast to Toews—was a pointed question of experience as a coherent concept in historical writing" (Surkis, 2012, p. 712, emphasis added). It is as if Surkis simply forgot what previously she herself had observed about Toews,



and in any case missed its import. Thus his deep concern with the blurring of any line between experience and theory becomes lost in the course of her essay.

So despite having looked his worry in the face, Surkis then completely pivots away from any discussion of it and offers instead a startling diagnosis of the “real” problem masked by talk of “the linguistic turn.” She characterizes this by claiming that Toews appealed “to a model of the ‘generation’ in order to hold the strains of ‘discourse’ and ‘experience’ together” (Surkis, 2012, p. 708). This categorizing imputed to Toews she condemns in no uncertain terms, as noted above.

But her emphasis on the supposed “temporality” and “constraint” of turn talk simply attributes to Toews a position he nowhere defends and appears to confuse his summary of Charles Taylor’s views with Toews’s own⁹. Nothing in Toews’s own account answers to what Surkis terms the “temporality of term talk”.

Most importantly for our purposes she simply ignores the discussion of rationality and argument with which Toews pointedly concludes his entire discussion. These issues arise in various forms in the essay, but he makes them quite explicit when examining misgivings about the implications of Rorty’s position voiced both by David Hollinger and Charles Taylor. Toews makes it a point to highlight the fact that Hollinger proves “uneasy with the demotion [by Rorty] of science to just another voice in the cultural conversation” (Toews, 1987, p. 903). Toews then continues the thread of this specific discussion when he moves on to discuss the volume *Philosophy in History*, of which Rorty is one of the editors. For he segues into that discussion by asserting (correctly, I would say) that the “issues at stake in the disagreements between Hollinger and Rorty should not be construed simply as differences in the professional perspectives of a historian and a philosopher... At issue is not simply the revision and enrichment of the history of philosophy through the expansion of its canon of relevant thinkers and questions, but the reformulation of the nature of philosophy as a cultural activity. The conventional analytic distinction between the validity and the historical genesis of truth claims is rejected” (Toews, 1987, p. 905). He follows this with a discussion of Charles Taylor’s critique of Rorty.

But in summarizing Taylor’s critique, Toews interestingly chooses to foreground the specific reasons that Taylor and Rorty *share* for rejecting the traditional framework, reasons now quite familiar from a variety of sources.

⁹ Here is what Toews’s actually says on one of the pages cited by Surkis “Taylor thus argues that it is possible to attain rational consensus or at least maintain a rational discourse about the relative validity of alternative patterns of cultural meaning. This possibility in turn is based on the intimate connection between meaning and experience, between discourse and communal practices” (Toews, 1987, p. 906). I suspect that she over-interprets how to read “communal practices,” and so sees a “generational” periodization of thought.



The epistemological model, he [Taylor] contends, was an abstract, universalizing, and thus self-justifying description of a form of social action implicitly embedded in a wide range of technological, ethical, and political practices. Criticism of this model originated in the encounter with the practices it justified and the growing recognition and self-assertion of alternative forms of social practice that the epistemological model could not assimilate or make intelligible. Philosophical activity as the historical criticism of cultural assumptions brings to articulation kinds of experience that have been repressed or ignored in the conventional culture. It refutes the previous model by demonstrating its inability to provide experience with intelligibility. Skepticism and “undecidability” could only arise from a critique of a cultural framework claiming exclusivity if the critic were without communal ties, without a historically situated life in specific social practices. But criticism of the epistemological model is also a criticism of the possibility of such a historically disengaged, culturally “homeless” stance. The recognition that philosophy is “inherently historical” is also a “manifestation of a more general truth about human life and society (Toews, 1987, p. 906).

Granted just here Toews does speak of “intellectual historians of the younger (post-1968) generation,” but this does not prove true the charge that Surkis made. Rather, she chooses to cast “the linguistic turn” as just another fashionable emphasis, one more methodological fashion whose time has come and gone.

The temporalizing logic of turn talk forecloses these critical possibilities [e.g., feminism and various forms of Marxist critique] rather than creating new horizons. It implicitly consigns still-vibrant analytic resources to a periodized posterity and political compromised epistemology. What is at stake here is not the positive or negative legacy of a purported ‘linguistic turn,’ but the usefulness and disadvantage of such fetishized ‘turns’ for history’s life. If narratives of generational supersession represent analytical and political foreclosure, what kind of horizon does the re-membering of this past open up? . . . Thus ‘generational thinking’ may limit the proliferation of knowledge tout court, not least by consigning the critical resources of feminism to a chronologically and politically exhausted moment.

Most pressing now, as we proliferate histories of our present, is the need to unsettle rather than confirm what appear to be increasingly sedimented narratives (Surkis, 2012, p. 721).



“Unsettling” is all well and good; it is the “confirming” that worries me. Proliferation there is; anything that looks like a consensus about “justification” appears to be sorely lacking. In this key respect, Surkis unwittingly erases all memory of the chief worry that ought to be associated with the linguistic turn. For if one cannot say what methodologically validates knowledge claims, why wring hands about what does or does not supposedly promote its “proliferation”?

Here it helps to bend discussion back to the *éminence grise* whose work, as noted at the outset, shadows discussions of “the linguistic turn” in historiography, viz., Hayden White. For White’s writings embody and exemplify the two very different but related problems which I have been insisting the linguistic turn intended to surface: first, the questioning of claims to represent some reality or other; and second, the question of what validates *any* historical knowledge claim, regardless of what one thinks about representation.

The fact that many of the complaints that White made with regard to the former questions have been assimilated into and so domesticated by “normal” historical practice simply underscores the studied silence with which the other question has been treated. For as White was well aware, think what you will of his early theory of tropes, rejecting it does not answer the other question that White insistently asked - what makes a narrative plausible? The burden of history, he insisted, consisted by and large of the fact that his answer to that question lay almost exclusively with an historian’s skills as a creator of narrative and not in its purported success in mirroring some reality.

In an insightful and quite pointed assessment of the domestication of White’s concerns by professional historians not long after his death in 2018 (and approaching five decades out from its initial publication of *Metahistory*), Carolyn Dean indicates why accounts such as Surkis’ prove to be just a symptom of the problem they claim to cure, viz., the need for “openness” to theory (Dean, 2019). She nicely puts her finger on what I have been claiming was and remains the great unanswered challenged posed by “the linguistic turn,” viz., the question of justification. White’s focus on how positivism circumscribed what historians can think never really got a substantive hearing from mainstream historians even as they explored other disciplinary approaches. However untenable *Metahistory*’s specific claims about the relationship between events and interpretation, reality and texts, the book raised and raises crucial questions about what historians do not or cannot hear, why, and to which presuppositions about ‘the historical field’ they might still be blind” (Dean, 2019, p. 1349). Instead of answering the challenged raised by positivists - e.g., do historians present just “explanation sketches”, and so fall short on that point at least of providing what a science requires? - historians simply grant new theories club membership without ever making clear what actually qualifies one for such.

Dean tartly puts the point this way.

The reception of *Metahistory* shows that, as White claimed, an openness to the diversity of arguments may obscure other forms of methodological and professional consensus; that, paradoxically, historians often resist theoretical and methodological challenges most effectively when they engage with new ideas. White's work asks if we every really abandoned the methodological consensus to which we have ostensibly come back over the last two decades: he suggests that because historians assimilated theoretical challenges into their own disciplinary framework, that consensus was never really threatened (Dean, 2019, p. 1349; see also p. 1349, fn. 63).

If, as Surkis suggests, the *de facto* motto for historiography now is just "let a thousand theories bloom," this provides cold comfort for those concerned to know how to separate the proverbial wheat from the chaff.

The theoretical goal, the unanswered question, remains one of determining how history contributes to the general project of constructing a coherent understanding of what there is, in Wilfrid Sellars' memorable formulation, "how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term." (Sellars, 1963, p. 1). The very title of the Sellars essay in which this remark appears, "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," is one where, *inter alia*, Sellars raises and attempts to answer just the type of meta-philosophical concern noted by Rorty at the outset of this essay - on what basis does philosophy claim its seat at the table alongside other sciences?

Sellars, writing also under the shadow of positivism, quite deliberately I suspect juxtaposes philosophical and historical inquiry precisely in terms of what each contributes to an understanding of "how things hang together" in the most general sense.

It is therefore, the 'eye on the whole' which distinguishes the philosophical enterprise. Otherwise, there is little to distinguish the philosopher from the persistently reflective specialist; the philosopher of history from the persistently reflective historian. *To the extent that a specialist is more concerned to reflect on how his work as a specialist joins up with other intellectual pursuits, than in asking and answering questions within his speciality, he is said, properly, to be philosophically-minded* (Sellars, 1963, p. 3; emphasis added).

What Dean identifies as "resistance to theory" by historians here can be identified as their collective refusal to be, in this specific Sellarsian sense, "philosophically minded." And to be so



just is to ask and attempt to answer questions about how what one does relates to whatever else one places on the map of human *knowledge*.

The positivist trap offered only a Hobson's choice, one where belonging to the realm of the cognitively significant mandated a forced choice between being an art or a science. Representationalism, imagined as providing a correspondence with a reality, was taken to license putting history safely on the science side. But, like Humpty-Dumpty, representationalism so conceived has no plausible prospect of being put back together again as a coherent theoretical approach to justifying historical (or any) practice. But justification does not require conceiving of history as a mirror of pastness, and so to require any metaphysical realism about the past, either ontological or conceptual (See, e.g., Kuukkanen, 2015 or Roth, 2020). The question of justification has not disappeared for historians, however much their studied refusal to discuss it tries to suggest otherwise. Historiography has yet to move past the linguistic turn only because it missed it.

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