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For an Impractical Past

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For an Impractical Past

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Abstract

Although the field of philosophy of history is unquestionably fragmented and, at present, without a center, this is not a new situation. To answer the question "what comes next?" without somehow explaining the future through the past, we need to confront the term postmodern in its original and paradoxical sense, as put forward by Jean-François Lyotard - as that which precedes and cannot yet be understood or narrativized. Thus, in the present, the "sideshadow" would prevail, which are all the possibilities that will not be accounted for in "what really happened," but which are of great importance at the moment. This is what the article is about: the unrealized possibilities of the future rather than a narrative of succession where the future seems an inevitable derivation of the present; and how historical narrative desublimates the past in order to explain it. The proposal of an impractical past is a call for humility on the part of the historian when presenting explanations of "what happened."

Keywords

Sublime; Sideshadowing; Impractical Past.

What next? Some backshadows

In his introduction to the valuable gathering of essays on recent theory of history, the editor of the volume, Jooni-Matti Kuukkanen, evoked a memorable image. The essays in the volume, he wrote, were like the map of a subway network, with stops in different locations but without a clear pattern. The stops are variously linked with various stations, but none is linked to all. And this, it seems, is a cause of frustration. As he writes: "There are good reasons to say that we are now in a novel situation without any clear paradigms, looking for new ways to go forward, or perhaps, any way to go forward."(Kuukkanen, 20221, p. 4). The implication here is clear. We normally proceed with the help of a conceptual map, without which we are aimless. The evidence for this is the variety of and lack of clear connections between the models of philosophy of history to be found today. One must agree that the essays in the volume Kuukkanen has skillfully assembled and edited, drawn as they in part are from a conference, do not offer "any clear paradigms." But is this "a novel situation"? If one's first encounter with philosophy of history had occurred, for example, in the mid-1960s, what would the venerable anthologies on the bookshelf indicate -- not exactly a random or exhaustive sample, to be sure, but representative of the "paradigms" of their moment, the 1950s (remembering, of course, that the popular use of paradigm to refer to dominant intellectual "maps" comes itself from Thomas Kuhn in the 1960s and would not have been in use for this purpose at that time)?

The earliest example from our sampling is Walsh's book *Philosophy of History* from 1951. It notes the challenge of the diverse topics in the philosophy, but solves them by banishing half.

> If any reader expresses surprise that matters so different should be treated in a single volume, I can meet him half-way by admitting that I am conscious of the incongruity myself; although I do not feel so clear as I once did that the problems which are touched on in my final chapters are wholly irrelevant to those treated in the earlier part of the book.
>
> To avoid misunderstanding, I should make clear that my primary aim is to write for philosophers, not for historians (Walsh, 1958, p. 7).

And so he largely ignores historical writing, while focusing on Kant and Hegel. As a sort of appendix, he considers Comte, Marx, and Toynbee, though admitting that there is not much connection between them. Marxian materialism, which bid fair to offer direction to half the world in the post-war era when Walsh was writing, is considered primarily in relation to Hegel, unsurprisingly.

He all but mocks the historian Arnold Toynbee, who was then an enormously influential historical voice, doubting (correctly, it seems) that anyone would read him in fifty years. It is the "disappointingly imprecise" nature of Toynbee's concepts that Walsh complains of; Toynbee has a vivid imagination, hobbled by "a singularly muddled intellect."[169]. Thus, in the rare spot where Walsh refers to actual historical accounts, his reflex is to fault them *a priori*.

Walsh, further:

> Acton is interested, for example, in the French Revolution of 1789 or the English Revolution of 1699 or the Russian Revolution of 1917; not, except incidentally, in the general character of revolutions as such. That is why the average history book ends when the writer has finished his account of the period under review; if the historian's interest were the same as the scientist's it would include another chapter, the most important in the work, in which the main lessons of the events in question would be set out in general terms (Walsh, 1958, p. 39).

Unaware, perhaps, of the classic book by (my teacher) Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (1938), Walsh concludes (boasts?) that his own "questions are largely, or even wholly irrelevant to historical studies proper." (Brinton, 1938, p. 7) Historical studies proper, therefore, miss the most important lessons because, unlike philosophical reflection, they avoid the general. Walsh's index is almost devoid of reference to actual historians, besides an occasional mention of Gibbon or Acton; they are clearly beside the point and Walsh doesn't know what to do with them. Besides Kant and Hegel, Collingwood is the philosopher most mentioned. There is no mention of Carl Hempel and "covering laws," but Oakeshott's distinction of the historical and practical past is to be found.

By contrast, Fritz Stern's *The Varieties of History* [1956] is an anthology gathered by and for "practicing historians," a term often used at that time (and today) to elevate themselves above the theoretical bunch; alternative terms are "history proper" or "working historians. (Hearing a speaker refer to "working historians" in a lecture, Hayden White once muttered "as opposed to what, 'thinking historians'"?). Stern's volume for historians comprises 14 selections from Voltaire to Bury. Even those excerpts that do not explicitly take the form "History as ..." (e.g. Biography, National Epic, an Academic Discipline, a Science) demonstrate the variety cited in his title. Each represents a different angle, or station on the conceptual map, one might say.

> The historian cannot escape these challenges; he broods, alone or in groups, over the presuppositions of his discipline, the logic and the method of his work, the place it should occupy among other, newer pursuits (Stern, 1956, p. 23).

Perhaps for this reason, Stern finds that historians "are reluctant to articulate their views about history."

The year 1959 saw two major anthologies appear, indicating the vitality and importance of the discourse. Patrick Gardner's *Theories of History* (1959) uses the now current expression "theories" rather than "philosophies" for reasons Gardiner hints at in the first sentence of his "Foreword."

> In making selections for the first part of this book I have been concerned in general to reproduce passages by writers more naturally classified as philosophers of history than as historians. "(Gardiner, 1959, p. v)

The first half of the book is called "Philosophies of History: Vico to Collingwood." The second half, astonishingly in light of the comment cited above, contains an even more philosophical crew than the first! Of the 19 scholars included, only two, writing together (Geyl and Toynbee), could be called working historians in Fritz Stern's terms. The rest, (figures like Popper, Russell, Walsh, Berlin, Hempel, Morton White, Nagel, Gallie, Dray, Donagan, Scrivener, Mandelbaum, Gellner) could hardly be more theoretical. Gardner's Introduction explains that the term "philosophy of history" is vague and unsatisfactory. It may represent an attempt to arrive at the meaning of history or a claim that historical events demonstrate laws of causation that both explain past events and predict future change" (Gardiner, 1959, p. 7).

> As a consequence of ambiguities like these the boundaries between what is known as 'philosophy of history' and other fields of speculation and inquiry are exceedingly difficult to draw: at some points it seems to shade off into sociology, at others into historical methodology, and at others again into history proper (Gardiner, 1959, p. 7)

This sounds very much like Kuukkanen's metro map. The first type of study gives you a conceptual map, the second type tells you where you are going.

The other anthology of 1959 was Hans Meyerhoff's *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*, which begins with the surprising statement that his decision to stay, on the whole, within

the boundaries of the twentieth century (why then is Burckhardt included?) should not imply that he favors the work gathered in his volume.

> On the contrary, I tend to believe that the philosophical reflections about history during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are still, in their total impact, superior to what has been produced in our own age (Meyerhoff, 1959, p. v).

As for diversity of viewpoints, Meyerhoff points to his (all male) mixture of professional philosophers and professional historians, as well as their "different national communities" -- England, United States, France, West Germany, Italy, and Spain. Nevertheless, the selections are, Meyerhoff asserts, "variations on a common theme"[vi], although it is not easy to find that theme, let alone hum it. This defensiveness about the cohesion of his anthology is undone a bit in the introduction, which blames the *Zeitgeist*.

> Thus the brilliant conquest of the most distant frontiers of historical knowledge also coincides with an increasing awareness of the meaninglessness of history. This awakening, in turn, has produced a strange loss of historical appetite. There is a deep craving for an escape from a nightmare of history into a mode of existence beyond history: art, mythology, religion, or apathy (Meyerhoff, 1959, p. 22).

The year 1960 ended the decade with two events that would show the way that was unknown to the anthologists of the 1950s. In 1960, George Nadel founded the journal *History and Theory*, hoping to overcome the anti-theoretical bent of historians mentioned by Stern with the prestige of the social sciences as heuristic. An ideal example of this might in a few years be a researcher studying medieval Church history through the lens of Weberian sociology. E.g. Hayden White.

In an essay titled "New Directions From Old," (1960), Northrop Frye remarked that the Aristotelian distinction between ritual, mimicking natural processes that are fundamentally repetitive, differed from history, which Frye calls an "imitation of action, or events put into the form of words." (Frye, 1963). The poet, he notes, has no "external model" for his creations, which are judged not by the adequacy of his representation of the model (human praxis), but by the quality of his verbal structures (Frye, 1963, p.53). The poetic rendering of the rituals of natural processes is myth (or Aristotle's *mythos*), he tells us. (One might add that the prosaic rendering of the rituals of natural processes is science.).

This brief tour of historical theory in the 1950s affords us several lessons. First, obviously, the editors, who assembled the best work they could, saw its diversity as the primary quality. We are not now, therefore, in a novel situation at all. Neither the social sciences nor rhetorical analysis were much present. Successful foreshadowing was rare. New directions there would be, but the anthologies of the 50s are reflections of the past, backshadows. I believe this was inevitable.

Postmodern precedes modern

If the term postmodern has any use today, it cannot be another modernity. We already have one of those, and the concept itself is built to last us indefinitely. What is modern is what is happening now. It is not what happened, nor what will happen; it is what is happening, more or less. The normal intensities of time - past, present, and future - create the modern. We cannot, therefore be postmodern within this sense of time; we are always already modern. By the same logic, postmodernity, where the suffix "ity" denotes an era in time, is also not possible. To say the present is postmodern is to ignore the obvious modernity of it. To say that postmodernity defined the 1980s and 1990s and that we are post-post-modern is to make a travesty of the whole thing. We are not postmodern and there is no postmodernity. This was made clear from the beginning of the discourse of the postmodern (although to be sure, I do not believe that the definite article "the" should be used with postmodern). Roland Barthes once said that language is fascist, not because it prevents us from saying things, but because it forces us to say things. This is one of those occasions.

Postmodern discourse took its earliest, and most radical, formulation by challenging, shall we say, being and time, and a visit to that moment of modernity called the postmodern condition should remind us of this. When Jean-François Lyotard wrote: "It seems to me that the essay (Montaigne) is postmodern, while the fragment (*The Athenaeum*) is modern." (Lyotard, 81.), he was making a point that is easy to forget. The postmodern condition, as he conceived it, is not the next thing, not what follows modernism or represents a response to it. Montaigne, the postmodern, precedes the Schlegels and their journal by several centuries. If it is the renaissance Frenchman who is postmodern and the romantic Germans who are modern, how should we understand time itself? The answer to this question, we recall, is an odd one. *The postmodern precedes the modern*. An event, say, a work of art, appears. Because it is unprecedented, it is either ignored or becomes an object of confusion. It may be said to have too many meanings to be meaningful, while many people attempt to interpret this work within existing structures. Is it art? Does it have an aesthetic function? Can't be shown in a museum? Is there a market for it? Does it have predecessors? What

is it? Should we ignore it? Can we ignore it, in which case it isn't, doesn't exist? If it is, what is it? What should we say about it? What it is, is postmodern. The event itself, not yet understood or nameable, is a candidate for understanding. Once it is understood, placed into a narrative that emplots it, it will be modern. The postmodern is "what will have been," in the future anterior tense. (But, we must remember, is not yet.) "Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant."[Lyotard, 79] Because of this, we must speak of entities like postmodernity or postmodernism only with the clear understanding that what we are referring to has ceased to have any of the original characteristics of the postmodern. The postmodern in its original sense, put forth by Lyotard, is part of the process by which modernity - defined as our current understanding of our situation - is generated. Postmodern is a product of modernity. So, because we can speak of postmodernism and postmodernity, the postmodern is already gone, in the sense that its presence as a recognizable nameable entity has made it fully modern. "What will have been" - the true postmodern not yet recognized as such - has become "what was and is," modernity. The unidentified pain is postmodern; the pin we locate and blame for that pain is modern. The pain persists, perhaps, but is no longer postmodern.

Writing history, then, is part of this process. To historicize is to create the modern, which is nothing more than what has been understood, in the minimal sense of being named and placed in a meaningful series in time - also known as being narrativized. The pain-pin example, as banal and shopworn as it has become since Jonathan Culler reminded us of Nietzsche's use of it to interrogate our sense of causality, is crucial to the logic of postmodern process and its challenge to the writing of history (Culler, 1981, p. 86). Frank Ankersmit suggests that the origin of history itself must come from a response to a terrible cultural trauma, a trauma in which the identity of the group itself is irredeemably changed. By pushing this trauma, this unforeseen and unforeseeable pain, to a distance, where it can be contemplated objectively, almost as an aesthetic object, the group has via history "become what it is no longer," in Ankersmit's phrase. The satisfaction of studying the pin, the objectified past "*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist,*" anaesthetizes the pain of the "world we have lost." This is the postmodern at work - the writing of history exists to make the inconceivably painful bearable, even pleasurable. It exists to make it modern.

If the postmodern is the process of producing the modern, and the modern is what has been historicized, as I believe, then what kind of historicization is this? As Hayden White once commented, anyone who suggests that we go "back to history" had better have a specific address in mind, because history can lead anywhere [White, "Getting Out of History"]. The kind of history we are dealing with in our conceptions (and more often misconceptions) of modernism and postmodernism is supersessive history, described by Anthony Kemp in his book *The Estrangement*

of the Past. Kemp points out that the idea of history as changing paradigms rather than a series of essentially repeating events is older than we think, and essentially religious. When the typological links between eras - the sort of thinking that could assert that Charlemagne was quite simply a Roman Emperor and that Rome had never fallen - gave way to the belief that each past age was superseded by the people and the understandings of the later one, the links to the past were cut and the road was laid out to the world that is familiar to us. With this, to quote Kemp:

> All areas of knowledge that become identified with the supersessive pattern tend to be reduced to mere paradigms, and it is this reduction that the term 'science' is designed to work against. Religion in the view of the enlightenment rationalists was so reduced; science, in the work of Kuhn, is undergoing a similar reduction (Kemp, 1990, p. 161).

The Hegelian supersessive path, which we all believe in much more than we can admit or perhaps even realize, is not so much wrong, then, as it is a swindle. By taking the modern, essentially the cult of the present, as the terminus and the standard of knowledge, we have given up any possibility of a culture in exchange for a remarkable knowledge of cultures. (Kemp, 1990, p. 158). This was Nietzsche's diagnosis, and it accords well with Ankersmit's proposal that history originates in the anesthetizing of a traumatic catastrophe, making of it an object that can be known, the world we have lost.

It is the supersessive historical mindset that virtually forces us to imagine a postmodernity coming 131376493 *after* the modern. We may delight in the paradoxical aesthetic pleasure of the temporal solecsism of the postmodern preceding the modern, but if it is to have any real use, the postmodern must not be modernized (as "postmodernism") or be historicized (as "postmodernity"). Let popular culture have these terms; for serious discussion of historical writing, the postmodern should be taken as a challenge to the supersessive.

Supersessive history, in which our understanding differs from and exceeds that of the past to such a degree that it may be said to do more than simply replace it, or to repeat it in a different (typological or figural) guise, is the key to the modern idea of the modern. Let me say it yet again, the modern is a certain idea of history. To speak of postmodernity is to modernize it, and thus, by example, to discount its challenge to the process (supersession) by which the modern creates itself. Since time has three intensities - past, present, future - we should look at three modes of representing the existence of things in time. The first of these is *foreshadowing*. It is something we do all the time, projecting a moment into the future, where its meaning will be made clear, or, if it is a past event, has already been made clear.

> If life had foreshadowing, what would it be like? We may imagine, for instance, that history has foreshadowing if we believe that it tends toward a fated end. For Soviet Marxists, for example, Communism in the future was woven into the temporal fabric of the universe; in other belief systems, nations may be governed by an implacable fate or a benevolent destiny. The end may be impossible to detect from within time, and we may be fated (as part of the plan) to mistake causes for signs and to misread whatever real signs are apparent. But it is also sometimes held that the end may be known not only to God but also to those people who have discovered God's plan, the eternal archetypes, or history's laws. Mysticism and certain forms of socialism provide abundant examples (Morson, 1994, pp. 50-51).

Historical foreshadowing may, as Morson makes clear, presume that the whole text of the future is written and that the known future - the time between the writing of history and the events depicted - and the actual future - what comes after the writing - are both versions of the same essentially understood story. But foreshadowing may also be much more benign. Take, for example, this passage from Tony Judt's *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*.

> The war changed everything. East of the Elbe, the Soviets and their local representatives inherited a sub-continent where a radical break with the past had already taken place. What was not utterly discredited was irretrievably damaged. Exiled governments from Oslo, Brussels or the Hague could return from London and hope to take up the legitimate authority they had been forced to relinquish in 1940. But the old rulers of Bucharest and Sofia, Warsaw, Budapest and even Prague had no future: their world had been swept aside by the Nazis' transformative violence. It remained only to decide the political shape of the new order that must now replace the unrecoverable past (Judt, 2005, 40).

In almost every sentence, markers show that the author knows things that seemed likely to the observer on Europe in 1945, but could not have been know for certain. "Changed everything," "irretrievably damaged," "had no future," "it remained only" - all of these phrases present us with the preparation for the appearance of "the irrecoverable past," which is precisely Judt's thesis. He knows the course of the next 50 years, and presumes that the Europeans of 1945 must have known it, too, in a certain way.

What Judt hinted at in showing a Europe where everyone basically knew that the old ways could not return is not foreshadowing, which is what he used to show his readers that the future must follow a path quite different from the past. Rather, his implication that this was obvious at the time - a claim that I cannot accept - is an instance of *backshadowing*. Backshadowing in the writing of history is a bit more complex. Recall the old credo of R.G. Collingwood that every historical action is the correct answer to a certain question, and that the historian must imagine backward to discover the exact question that a historical actor had in mind. The actor must have known, not the actual outcome of his actions, but rather the outcome of his intentions. Thus, the actual outcome tells us what the actor did and did not know.

> Those who fail to foresee are therefore typically regarded as blind or self-blinded. Like Oedipus, they could have known what would happen next. But in many cases, they are more to blame than Oedipus because unlike that fated king, they might have taken action to alter or attenuate the forces threatening them. A particular tone of superiority therefore characterizes the back shadowing observer, who passes judgment on those who failed to take responsible action (Morson, 1994, p. 234).

This quotation from Morson brings home the dangers of the backshadow. Backshadowing turns the past into a tightly emplotted drama, and insists that the actors (like real stage actors) pretend not to know what the ending will be, but actually do know, or ought to. Signs of the denouement are being signaled throughout the drama. As Chekhov said somewhere, if a gun hangs over the mantle in the first act, it must go off by the end of the third act. It is the outcome that determines what events occur in the drama -everything is focused backwards. And we judge the actors by the outcome, because they should have known (Morson, 1994, pp. 236-7).

The guilt that defines the actors in the past who should have known what would become of things (the sort of things that political leaders face every day from their backshadowing opponents) has a particularly keen historical import for representations of events like the Holocaust, for which judgments seem inevitable, and backshadowing if used to condemn both the perpetrators, the bystanders, and, at times, the victims. Was the Holocaust the inevitable result of cultural and political events, or the free choice of individuals who could have been stopped? The preference for the former attitude, I think, is an attempt to match the magnitude of the event with a large and powerful explanatory mechanism. To say that it was all the fault of a handful, or even a nation, of individuals, is to diminish the event. It was, however, an unimaginable event. The paradoxes of backshadowing are described by Michael André Bernstein.

> On a historical level, there is a contradiction between conceiving of the Shoah as simultaneously unimaginable and inevitable. On an ethical level, the contradiction is between saying no one could have foreseen the triumph of genocidal anti-Semitism, while also claiming that those who stayed in Europe are in part responsible for their fate because they failed to anticipate the danger (Bernstein, 2003, p. 348).

The ethical issue for the historian is one of respect, respect for the dignity of the people who lack the advantage of our position in the present, where all past moments seem complete, inevitable. They must have happened because they did happen. But as they were experienced, those moments were open, with many contingent possibilities and no story to rely upon.

It may be true, as Morson notes, that backshadowing is most fully prevalent in philosophies of history that strongly plot the past and future. Marxism is certainly the classic example of this for our time. Bernstein reminds us of the classic Soviet joke: Q - What was the world-historical event of 1875? A - Vladimir Ilyitch Lenin was five years old. Backshadowing, however, is not only the basis of totalizing philosophies of history. It is the basis of almost any *plot*, as such. It is narrative that establishes the outcome (or the moment of enunciation, to use the narratological term) as the telos. So here is the content of the narrative form that Hayden White has told us so much about. It will always emplot the events so as to add to them what they did not have before the emplotment - sense. Narrative is what renders an always postmodern present into a modern meaning. When we have a version of past (and of present, too, because such versions are always available), we have what is modern. Thus, postmodernism, with its primers, conferences, and endless discourse, is as modern as can be. The rule of the present and its enormous "presence" is hard to challenge.

Sideshadows

There is, however, a third path, one that neither foreshadows nor backshadows unnecessarily, and that respects the openness of lived experience to the innumerable possibilities we imagine are contained in any moment.

> Whereas foreshadowing works by revealing apparent alternatives to be mere illusions, sideshadowing conveys the sense that actual events might just as well not have happened. In an open universe, the illusion is inevitability itself. Alternatives always abound, and, more often than not, what exists need not have existed. *Something else* was possible, and sideshadowing is used to create a sense of that "something else."

> Instead of casting a foreshadow from the future, it casts a shadow 'from the side," that is, from the other possibilities. Along with an event, we see its alternatives; with each present, another possible present. Sideshadows conjure the ghostly presence of might-have-beens or might-bes. While we see what did happen, we also see the image of what else could have happened. In this way, the hypothetical shows through the actual and so achieves its own shadowy kind of existence (Morson, 1994, pp. 117-8).

In sideshadowing, then, we find alternatives, possibilities, hypotheticals, ghostly presences, all of them evoking fictional worlds, where many things that did not happen might happen. This condition is the present, if we reject determinism and its tyranny and believe ourselves to be in an open universe, a universe of possibilities. If you accept the logical and ethical improprieties of foreshadowing and backshadowing, the notion of sideshadows comes as a moral relief, a way of paying respect to the indeterminacy of lived existence.

The indeterminacy I have in mind is the indeterminacy of the present. We do not know what will happen, or we would all be rich from the race-track or the stock market or from anything else. There is plenty of proof that we just don't know and that those who seem to know are little more than statistically fortunate guessers, like all of us. But the writer-historian has two presents: one of them is his own (the "moment of enunciation", as the narratologists put it), which is as open as yours and mine right now. The other is the present of the past. And there we cannot speak of how things actually were in their sideshadows without evoking the fictional, the reality of what did not happen.

It is troubling, however, to those who insist on the barriers between history and fiction. As if the narrative assumptions that make foreshadowing and backshadowing possible in proper historical discourse were not enough of a problem, the matter of possible worlds, the fruits of the historical sideshadowing imagination, must be contained. Here I cite the work of Lubomir Dolezel, who is at pains to distinguish between fictional and historical worlds. Seeking to address "the level of world" rather than the "level of discourse," (Dolezel, 1999, p. 256). Dolezel details four differences between fictional and historical worlds. First, he notes that the historical world must be physically possible, unlike the fictional, in which there is no negation. Second, the cast of agents for history must be limited to those whom the documents say actually participated; if a figure is shown to have been absent, that figure is out, and so forth. It follows from this that historical figures may not co-habit a world with fictional persons (Dolezel, 1999, p. 257). Third, Dolezel notes that historical persons - "as well as their events, settings, etc." - must be documented, and so must be

revised, refined, or rewritten as the documentation changes. Finally, there is the problem of gaps and incompleteness in the worlds of history and fiction. Gaps in fiction are artistic choices, one might say, while gaps in historical worlds are epistemological (Dolezel, 1999, page 258-9).

Dolezel's strictures on sideshadowing, on hypothetical possibities, on the openness of any present moment as it becomes somehow historical are rather depressing. He imagines an existing world of historical reality, a paratext, that is known through documents and always open to expansion or contraction. In short, although he wants to move beyond the level of discourse, he has in fact made everything discourse. In contrast to this, I will cite Frank Ankersmit's contention that the historical object, a vision of the past, is like a picture, not a story. It is one perspective among others; it omits what seems inappropiate to the historian's vision. Its goal is to offer as panoramic a view of its subject as possible, yet its subject is constituted by the work itself as a monad, independent of other visions (Ankersmit, 1983).

I know of no better example of the postmodern, in the sense of a concept not yet made intelligible by placement into an existing cultural pattern, than the story told in Edmundo O'Gorman's *The Invention of America*. [Here, I must give full credit to Alvaro Matute, who first drew my attention to O'Gorman the postmodern historian at the International Congress of Historical Sciences in Oslo in 2000.] O'Gorman's phrase for America - repeated exactly in several places in his English lectures - is "an unforeseen and unforeseeable entity." (O'Gorman, 1961, p. 122). This is exactly the sort of thing Lyotard must have had in mind. What follows this event (I mean the encounter with the big whatever) was an ongoing attempt to make sense of it, to fit it into existing patterns, usually by altering the patterns, hoping that the outcome would work. There simply wasn't enough evidence to assure that any option was the right one. Everyone, beginning with Columbus, was working in the dark. Particularly revealing is the reconstructed pair of maps - the first shows Cuba and marks the section of the southern coast traced by Columbus; the second shows that Cuban southern coast as the southern coast of China, as Columbus imagined it to be on his second voyage. O'Gorman writes: "When it is affirmed that Columbus discovered the American continent by chance when he hit upon some lands which he believed were part of Asia, that is, when we are told that Columbus revealed the being of an object entirely different from the one with which he had endowed it, we are actually being asked to believe that the object revealed its secret and hidden being at the moment when Columbus perceived it and by virtue only of that perception, for otherwise there is no other possible way to explain the revelation which we are told took place." (O'Gorman, 1961, p. 39). Later, in a wonderful allegory, O'Gorman writes of the four existing continents as four individuals, each with a distinct personal life and attitude; three have always lived together and one believes that his view of things has a special status, in fact,

universal validity. It is he who naturally claims the right to establish just what must be made of the suddenly appearing stranger, the fourth man. Should he be seen as a monster with no real human significance? If so, he can only acquire human status either by imitating the model, or by risking his own idiosyncratic and original path (O'Gorman, 1961, p. 135). These are the options.

A second invention accompanies the great Columbus into history, the invention of the flat earth. Like most of us, I was raised to believe that Christopher Columbus had disproven the widely-held belief that the earth was flat, that one could sail off the edge. In this belief, the sailors on the voyage were just like the scholars who had tried to prevent Isabella from sponsoring the expedition, maintaining that it would end in disaster because of the shape of things. To be sure, the ancients had believed in a spherical earth, but like so much else, it was maintained, this was lost with the advent of the Middle Ages and its purported darkness. Jeffrey Burton Russell, however, in *Inventing the Flat Earth* demonstrates that Columbus did no such thing because the Flat Error, as he calls it, was held by almost no one, was, in effect, not much more powerful than it is today. The objections made against Columbus's voyage were based on the distance to be traveled, not the limits of terrestriality. And these objections were correct.

The Flat Error - the notion that belief in a flat earth was prevalent in Columbus's time and that his achievement was a bold step forward for reason and progress - is a product of the last two centuries, especially the nineteenth, in their assault on any theological understanding of the world.

The Flat Error and the few Church Fathers who rejected the spherical earth (Lactantius and Cosmas) became symbolic players in the Darwinist disputes of the late nineteenth century, and the general assault on Roman Catholicism. In other words, the Flat Error and the imaginary disputes over it at the University of Salamanca, have been repeated without much thought to this day despite the proper debunking of Samuel Eliot Morison and Salvador de Madariaga.

> During the nineteenth century it became increasingly common to opt for scientific realism or positivism and to tolerate theology only insofar as it abandoned its proper epistemology in favor of a scientific basis. In the later nineteenth century, many philosophers and scientists were vigorously attacking the position that theology had an epistemological basis of its own, and by the end of the century they had been so successful in establishing their viewpoint that they were outraged - or dumfounded - that relics of it persisted. Christian epistemology was identified with an outmoded, obsolete, medieval worldview, and because this worldview is so foreign to the modern, progressivist worldview, it was misunderstood as superstition. Thus it came to seem

> natural, obvious, certain, that medieval people were so superstitious that they must have believed in something as foolish as the flat earth (Russell, 1991, p. 71).

Although the postmodern condition is constant, Lyotard does hint that the past two centuries have seen an unprecedented pace of happening. "In an amazing acceleration, the generations precipitate themselves." (Lyotard, 1979, p. 79). This suggests that the dynamic of the postmodern may simply be more noticeable now. - I shall not agree or disagree about this, because I have no access to experience of change in any other generation but my own. Certainly, we are not the first to comment on the subject. Hayden White, however, has put forth the notion that there is a peculiarly new kind of event, which he calls the "modernist event." In such an event narrative becomes useless, not because we have too little evidence about the event to make sense of it, but because we have too much - indeed, because the evidence is the event itself. He cites as examples among others, the Challenger space explosion of 1986 and the O.J. Simpson car chase event, both filmed from many angles, and analyzed obsessively. One might certainly add the attack in 2001 on the World Trade Center.

White observes that such events "could not possibly have occurred before the twentieth century" (White, 1999, p. 69) because they depend on the technology of representation that are part of our modernity. Replaying the tapes of the Challenger disaster, the evidence of the event, offer no sense of its meaning. Not too little evidence, but so much that "[i]t appeared impossible to tell any single authoritative story about what really happened - which meant that one could tell any number of possible stories about it." (White, 1999, p. 73). White notes that the trial of O.J.Simpson was quite another event from the crime-event, almost part of another "universe of occurence." (White, 1999, p. 86). I would add to this that the conclusions about the *Challenger* were similarly detached. In both cases, we find a powerful backshadowing at work. It was all about what *must have happened*, since the evidence of what did happen was indecipherable.

White calls these "modernist" events, and points out that the postmodern genres that set aside the distinctions between real and imaginary derive from that aspect of modernism that "abandons both the referential and the poetic" uses of language (White, 1999).

"Whatever" and Terror

I use the word "whatever" to refer to aspects of the open present, the moment of the *sideshadows*. In *The Coming Community*, Giorgio Agamben imagines the ethics of a "coming community" of whatever beings, beings who have no characteristics whatever except their being.

Although his discourse is not simple, I interpret it as figuring forth a sort of undigested postmodern eruption, one that will never be made modern, historicized. It remains in the mode of possibilities, perhaps sideshadows. To quote Agamben:

> Kant defines the schema of possibility as "the determination of the representation of a thing in whatever time." It seems that the form of the *whatever*; an irreducible *quodlibet*-like character, inheres in potentiality and possibility, insofar as they are distinct from reality. But what potentiality are we dealing with here? And what does "whatever" mean in this context? Of the two modes in which, according to Aristotle, every potentiality is articulated, the decisive one is that which the philosopher calls "the potentiality to not-be" (*dynamis me einai*) or also impotence (*adynamia*). For if it is true that whatever being always has a potential character, it is equally certain that it is not capable of only this or that specific act, nor is it simply therefore simply incapable, lacking in power, nor even less is it indifferently capable of everything, all-powerful: The being that is properly whatever is able to no-be; it is capable of its own impotence. Everything rests here on the mode in which the passage from potentiality to act come about (Agamben, 1993, p. 34).

Let us look at the key ideas. "The potentiality to not-be" sounds quite unhistorical; after all, even the whatever is. But if we ask ourselves whether, say, America, is capable of not being, I think the answer is yes. America, O'Gorman reminds us, was not before its invention as America. It would not be if the invention had occurred otherwise; rather another whatever would have been made modern by naming. As Agamben might have said, the singularity of the "whatever," its lack of identity, is "determined only through its relation to an idea, that is, to the totality of its possibilities." (Agamben, 1993, p. 66). It is the "passage from potentiality to act", as Agamben puts it, that is either the maintenance of the "whatever singularity" in its radical subversiveness, or its historicization. From potentiality to act what O'Gorman - and the long rhetorical tradition - calls "invention."

And we are so familiar with the comforts of historical invention, naming things and making stories, that the elementary units escape our attention. Take the "event." The concept is a scandal. Let me ask - is this essay an event? Is your reading this essay an event? Is my placing my hand on top of my head an event? Is the wandering of your mind while reading this essay an event? How many events have taken place here since you began to read? To think in these terms is to establish clearly that an event is the product of discourse, a rhetorical invention cut from the flow of happening (which I call the *advent*) for whatever specific purpose we have at the moment (cf.

Kellner, 1992). It is not a world of events, any more than a world of things. (How many things are in this room?) And yet, events and things serve our purposes well enough, because they are *our* purposes.

The postmodern always precedes the modern, and in the form of *astonishment*. Edmund Burke wrote: "THE PASSION caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror." (Burke, 1899, p. 1).

So astonish me! Is there a historiography of astonishment? Tell me the French Revolution had no deeper meaning than the violence it unleashed, or that America was not discovered, or that the political culture of the United States is older than that of France or England. Such apparent absurdities feed the discourse of the opponents of postmodernism (they may be the only ones who believe in it) who think that certain statements by (mostly) French thinkers demonstrate that there are no constraints at all, that anything goes. Certainly, the proper historians will rebel at the statements, unless the names Simon Schama, Edmondo O'Gorman, and Alexis de Tocqueville are cited as the authors of them. Tocqueville, for example, whom I have described elsewhere as the post-modern historian par *excellence*, calls succession in time into question often (cf. Kellner, 1998). American government is older than those in Europe, he writes, because the decentralized institutions of medieval feudalism came to America and took the institutional form of townships, a form which lasts to this day, centuries after Europe had gone on to centralized innovation. America is thus the elder of Europe. And Simon Schama, in *Citizens*, threw out the time-worn and stale ideological foreshadowings of the French historiographic tradition. For him, the events of the French Revolution were not the harbingers of a rising bourgeoisie, nor of an oppressed working class, nor a herald of any later revolution. What they were was an outbreak of violence from a series of moments, moments when something else might well have happened. He permits no larger narrative of history to lend meaning to all this; appropriately, he subtitles the book *A Chronicle of the French Revolution*. For it is chronicle, with its relative inattention to the issue of explanation, that is the issue here. To reject narrative in favor, to be sure, of many little stories, is to make the point I have been discussing here. Because our life in time is always driving into a future we cannot know (although the historians may *someday* know *something* about it), our life "*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist,*" is not the narrative wrought by the historical tradition of the nineteenth century, the tradition we still pay homage to in our quest to find the meaning of it all, but rather it (our lived experience) is a world of sideshadows, of might-bes and of might-have-beens, just the sort of thing that narratives erase. Schama claims that "violence was the motor of the revolution," (Schama, 1991, p. 859) and when he asks why, and why in France, he can only state that France

was "not uniquely damaged," (860), and that, as Burke wrote, the events were "both sublime and terrible." Perhaps most sublime and terrible is his final image, one of the "stories worth telling" that motivate the book. It tells of the end of Théroigne de Méricourt, a firebrand of the revolution, who had led ferocious bands of women until she was beaten senseless by a band of market-women. The rest of her life, from 1793 to 1817, she was a madwoman in an asylum, naked in her cell, crying out revolutionary phrases in an unstoppable delirium (Schama, 1991, p. 859). These phrases, ironically, serve Schama as the ideological backshadowing explanations that he believes are no longer credible.

Burke spoke of the horror that accompanies the astonishment before the sublime in nature. This is the horror that must accompany a sideshadowed history, a history presented through an open narrative structure, in which the future is as invisible to the reader as to the actors.

If, then, any conventional historical narrative is fictionalized (and powerfully) because of the inevitable narrative emplotment that places characters into a story that is finished from beginning to end, then a sideshadowed narrative is fictionalized differently. The many fictions of the historians are put aside in the interests of a new fiction, the fiction that we do not now what is coming. And yet, this fiction has been embraced, and the others put aside, precisely because of our allegiance to the oldest of historical goals, the desire to present the past "as it actually happened."

I have gone back to the canonical description of the process by which the astonishing *whatever* - the postmodern - becomes well-known and familiar, that is, modern. Naturally, in this process, the astonishment and sheer openness to contingency is lost. The "whatever" is historicized by being narrativized. It becomes part of a story, things that could not be otherwise for the simple reason that they were not otherwise. In this process, even the postmodern is turned into its contrary -- postmodernism or postmodernity, once full of books, articles, and conferences. The term is used in advertising, in editorials, in every and any casual discourse. The unfamiliar postmodern has become utterly a piece of the modern. The modern, because it is based on a historicization of the present, always swallows and digests almost anything. In this process of "the writing of history" - my topic here, it is the postmodern sublime that must be sacrificed

This is because history, and the form on which it depends, narrative, exists to provide meaning. A meaningless history is a history without a plot, perhaps a bare chronicle or an Enlightenment-era tale of the sorry, pointless, wars and follies of previous generations.

To explain, to establish meaning, is to emplot. What cannot be emplotted does not exist. The modern is the meaningful. The postmodern is what came before.

Since plotted meaning resides in the present (because we cannot know a plot until the work in concluded), the present governs all history. The foreshadowing and backshadowing in

historical writing is endless and necessary for it to have meaning. However, it also violates the old credo to relate the past as it happened. Every past moment was a present moment. And every present moment is postmodern, to some extent. We do not know the present, its overwhelming presence hides its meaning. While most present moments prove to be "everydays," without much direction, some are not. Some presents are "whatevers," astonishing things. Because these moments are open to possibility, they should be defined as a world of sideshadows.

Historical sideshadowing is rare because it attempts to show a moment whose meaning does not yet exist, and thus remains to be invented. And so I discussed two historical inventions. One was Edmundo O'Gorman's story of how a postmodern thing became a modern thing, America. The other, Jeffrey Burton Russell's tale of the invention of the Flat Earth, shows us a less successful effort. Sideshadowing plays a small role in academic history; its impact is far larger on the genre of historical metafictions, a genre which has defined the recent past. The nature of this form, so feared by historians, is to present us with the astonishment felt by past actors at a moment in time. Astonishment is the only sentiment to describe an encounter with the postmodern thing, the whatever, what has no decided explanation. Another word for this astonishment is the sublime, which makes our explanations seem impossible or inconsequential. The moment of sideshadows, I should say, is a moment of the historical sublime.

Why the Historical Sublime Matters

To speak of possibility and sideshadows is to risk a certain irresponsibility, positing the existence of many things that are not and will never be - that is, the open future. Although the topic could hardly be more central to matters of historical theory, I shall nevertheless try to de-center it a little by talking about the *suppression* of irresponsibility that made history as a profession and politics as a legitimate vocation possible. And that is the suppression of the historical sublime.

The American philosopher Gary Schapiro placed the discussion of the historical sublime in a useful context, which is a historical context.

> It was the task of the eighteenth century to articulate the duality of the beautiful and the sublime as a way of comprehending the alternatives of the aesthetic life, and of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to develop the consequences of taking one or the other of these alternatives to have a special priority (Schapiro, p. 233).

We note that the nineteenth century saw the take-off (not the birth - births rarely happen in history) of both theory of history (and I need not list the names here as they are all too familiar and anthologized) and of social responsibility, which seems more keenly felt in the span between the Greek uprising against the Ottomans, the Polish uprising against Russia, both evoking public support from writers and scholars, and the century's end with the Dreyfus Affair, an international stage for socially responsible folk to try their hand as "influencers," as we call them today.

And Hayden White commented that it was the task of nineteenth century historical practice effectively to desublimate our knowledge of the past and thus create the profession of history. This meant not only that the poetic figuration and stylistic energies of romantic historiography and its notable predecessors would be purged in the name of the "real," what actually happened, but also that the trappings of bureaucratic, scientific, sensible endeavor were established and institutionalized. That is to say, history left what Schapiro called "the aesthetic life," and became a profession, for better or worse. This involved many things -the solidification of the doctoral degree as the normal guarantee of professional historical status, along with an understood hierarchy of institutions granting these degrees and predicting their future value. It also gave rise to journals (*Revue historique, Historische Zeitschrift, Americal Historical Review*, etc.), along with, again, an unspoken but well-recognized hierarchy of such journals, not to mention the proliferation of scholarly conferences, often international. Historical associations supplanted local groups of amateurs while archives became an important part of the modern state (P. Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional*). A modern form of knowledge was forged in tandem with modern forms of business organization and modern forms of technology and social relations. The modern fact was born (M. Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact*). One might say that the sideshdows of every present moment have been extinguished. This is what it meant to be desublimated.

Historical methodology was also predictably affected, particularly in the matter of topic selection and method of presentation. In other words, what was historical began to change, broadening in ways that continue today in an accelerated manner - see, for example, the variety of the essays in *Philosophy of History: Twenty-First-Century Perpectives*, edited by Kuukkanen and mentioned above). There is a proper decorum for the historical topic, as we teach our students; it should be clearly delimited and defined, small and focused, both as befitting a beginner, but also to ensure that other parts of the process don't go off the tracks. Because history is the realm of change (as opposed to the more static classifications of the social sciences), there should be a condition before and after the event or situation as historically described and some account given of how things got from one moment to another. The rules for this account will normally not involve the transformational processes of the natural sciences, such as chemical reactions,

physical explosions, or genetic alterations. Instead, they will follow the available models of literary story-telling, without veering too far into the paths and devices of advanced writers. No Proust, no Joyce, no Kafka as models. The aesthetic life, at least, is not for beginners; only the elders, proven by years of conformity, may occasionally attempt a form that diverges from plain and direct narrative (which, to be sure, is not a simple matter to attain and remains of tremendous value in support of what popular prestige history retains among its non-professional readers). This conservatism of guild history in its written forms - using 19th century prose models as the acceptable norm - was mentioned somewhat critically by Hayden White as far back as 1966. In a desire for *a certain form* of realism, history remained predominantly desublimated because that was perceived, and is still perceived, as responsible practice. Yet almost 50 years later, in his last published book, White championed precisely that 19th century genre, the realist novel, which always, he says, has the past as its topic (White, Hayden. 2014). The reason White gives for this apparent turn from a conventionalized fact-based practice to a fictional account of reality is simply that the methodology of *responsible* history (respect the chronology of events, no invented characters or dialogue or situations that cannot be documented, and so forth) cannot tell us what we want to know (or, perhaps, should want to know) about the past - namely, "what was it like?" So White follows Erich Auerbach (and Georg Lukacs and Fredric Jameson) in his praise and study of the realistic novel. To be sure, this might run the risk of misleading the reader, who might well wonder whether Pierre Bezhukov really did have Napoleon in his gunsight? (Tolstoy); or whether the governor of California during the 1969 Berkeley riots was actually named "Ronald Duck"? (Lodge, 1975). Responsible or irresponsible, the novels in which these contentions are made (Tolstoy's *War and Peace and Lodge's Changing Places*), despite their very different voices, seek to present a vision of a world that is arguably broader and deeper, arguably more meaningful, than any historical account of the sort that Tolstoy explicitly mocks. (Kellner, 2021). Hence White's appeal to a "practical past."

Referring back to the quotation from Gary Schapiro, we note that he has suggested much the same thing. The nineteenth and early twentieth century had to decide which of two alternate visions of the world was to be supreme. Its decision, I think, is clear. Realism, which is the claim of the serious, responsible, forms of knowledge (with history at the top of the heap, as the social sciences depend on history for evidence), strives to beautify all it embraces. The sublime is left to the avant-garde arts and to human psychology. In these terms, the sublime, at least the historical version of it, which was relegated to the arts *in extremis*, may be called the "impractical past." But what is the historical sublime?

The historical sublime has taken a number of forms (as I have described in the *Routledge Companion to Historical Theory* and will not recount here.). What they have in common may be understood by taking note of Kant's discussion of the sublime in The *Critique of Judgement*. The "true sublime" exists only in the mind of the judging subject, not in any thing to be judged. He writes, in effect, that our comprehension may be paralyzed when we perceive something so overwhelming that we cannot conceptually make sense of it. These two functions of the mind, perception and comprehension, are normally in sync and produce the beauty of understanding, things we can explain and take for granted. When the former but not the latter work, the *sublime* may arise.

As we well know, it was Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth-century who established the philosophical centrality of the rich discussions about the sublime, a century after Boileau's revival of Longinus's ancient treatise on what the Frenchman called the sublime (*hypsos*, meaning *great* in Longinus's Greek). But a philosophical rendering of the sublime, always understood with its *frère ennemi*, the beautiful, changed things, or perhaps simply described a world that was already changing. This duality generated or embodied many forms of understanding that we take for granted, as Richard Kuhns makes clear. To mention just a few examples, we note that Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* dubs the beautiful and subime, one might say, Apollonian and Dionysian, and this pair will generate the more familiar, if currently unfashionable, Freudian categories, "of conscious and unconscious, of ego and id, of expressed and repressed, and of secondary process/primary process thinking." (Kuhns, 1982, p. 290). How this aesthetic dualism affects history, which has long prided itself on a more solid footing than such notions as these found in mere literary talk, is evident. Serious knowledge, which is *responsible* knowledge, is formally beautiful, Apollonian, a product of the conscious mind of the knower. The fantastic dream-world of the unconscious described, for example, in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* of 1913 is sign of mental and moral decay, leading inevitably to death. Certainly impractical. This is what the sublime was consigned to in modernity. Science, literary realism, and history would have none of it.

The *beautiful*, on the other hand, is just the thing, the goal. This, because the beautiful, unlike the sublime, *explains*. In its controlled, delimited, clear manner, it flatters our human desire to understand. In the sciences, the beautiful follows a "method" which is purported to be the guarantee of current understanding. The scientific method is open to disagreements, to rejection, to failure, but all in the form of a process that justifies the enterprise. *Method* is what beautifies all endeavors that aspire to the status of science. In history, although the method is different (not experimentation, but narrative), the goal is the same -- greater understanding. We can understand the past and its changes by inventing a story. No story, no history. But it must be a story that deals with matters*outside* its position as a story. To ponder its narrative possibility, that is, its status as a

story, is to abandon the high moral ground that the beautiful can claim. It is to invite assaults like that of George Iggers when he wrote that historians who have taken seriously the need to approach history as a body of writing, to be studied through "contemporary linguistic, semiotic, and literary theory" must nevertheless "share criteria of plausibility" with "a community of inquiring minds." (Iggers, 1997 p. 145). This community, however, is presumably made up of individuals who read and reflect. And, as Dominick LaCapra once wrote, historians are professionally taught*not* to read. (LaCapra, 1983 p. 339). Reading endangers the whole enterprise if it sees the language as well as the story.

Before the desublimation of responsible knowledge, a process that White asserts is the origin of our historical understanding, in practice and in theory, there was another factor involved, and importantly involved -- the reader. To quote Lionel Gossman: "What was important was not the truth of the narrative so much as the activity of reflecting about the narrative, including that of reflecting about its truth." (Gossman, 1999, p. 244). In choosing the beautiful, truthful, disciplined narrative, as the only responsible way to experience the past (that is, as a beautiful historical experience as opposed to a sublime historical experience, to borrow terms from Frank Ankersmit), the nineteenth century formation of a historical profession relegated the*reader* to a subsidiary, almost invisible, role.

The historical reader is a troubling thing. Like the historical sublime experience, it is not given to explanation or theory. What objective facts could we supply for each individual response to a historical work beyond basic competence in following grammar and syntax? Individual response goes well beyond readerly competence. Even one reader is a multitude.

Historical (Ir)responsibility: An Impractical Past

This would seem to pose a challenge for any sense of responsibility.

The term responsibility has its authority (who wants to be called irresponsible?) because it is rarely looked into deeply. Its etymology refers to a religious ceremony of some kind and its Latin root declares it is an *answer*. The problem arises when we ask to whom we are responding, what questions we are answering, what kind of ceremony we are obligated to observe. Responsibility is, therefore, what White might call a figure, which may or may not be fulfilled.

Who can predict, explain, anticipate, or control a reader? Would any of us read Spengler, or Braudel as we once did, let alone as they were variously read in the years since publication? Can we even consistently read our own work from decades past? Does it mean the same thing? What is responsible, fixed, about this disturbing dislocation? To say that context and situation will

establish which part of an "identity" will come into play is to defer the problem because "reading" the situation is just as unpredictable as any interpretation of the historical text. Our perception of the vast diversity of readerly meaning-making cannot be easily comprehended, that is, conceptualized.

The sublime, therefore, in whatever form it may take, has been seen as a danger, or rather an antidote, to responsibility because it freezes the individual in the face of change, which is the great threat. By imagining forces that are so vast or, in some case, so small, the historical agent becomes an observer (or a reader), standing in front of the canvas of human development, or reading the saga of heroic exploits, and cannot help adopting a stance of awe or fear at what separates the viewer from the scene. The agent ceases to be an agent at all. Responsibility has vanished by being aestheticized. Hyperbole, the ironic figure that over-states things for a purpose that is apparently artistic, but that may also serve a political and social function of making change seem inexplicable, beyond our understanding. The clarity that is necessary for social responsibility cannot coexist with a sublime uncertainly in which time itself is called into question, and the post-modern precedes the modern, according to Lyotard. The sublime, in these critiques, is a cowardly way of avoiding a confrontation with change. So the argument goes.

But not for Hayden White, who saw in the sublime something that was critical to a human project of change.

He wrote:

> The politicization of historical thinking was a virtual precondition of its own professionalization, the basis of its promotion to the status of a discipline worthy of being taught in the universities, and a prerequisite of whatever 'constructive' social function historical knowledge was thought to serve (White, 1987, p. 62).

This politicization, which was the result of the disciplinization of historical knowledge by its beautification as *explanatory* narrative, served the powers of responsibility. It established what goes without saying, the unspoken, the obvious: namely, the factual account of what actually happened. Any cause that might challenge this, or strive to reach beyond the understood realities, was not worthy of serious attention, except as a specimen of visions that were at best utopian, or more often, fantastical and irresponsible. Because it was a de-sublimated, or one might say, beautified, way of presenting an image of the past, the politicization took on the legitimacy of whatever regime was standing. And the reverse, the regime took on the legitimacy of the de-sublimated and politicized historical profession.

It should be clear by now that the historical sublime evokes what might be called 'The Impractical Past." The Historical Past, as described by Michael Oakeshott, is what Hayden White called a de-sublimated - that is to say, beautified - past, highly constricted by rules of evidence and documentable certitude of the sort that might be admissible in a law court. Social responsibility, as generally understood, depends on the reliability and certainty that a good approximation of what actually happened is attainable by a professionalized, credentialed, group of narrative-creators. The limitations of the Historical Past derive from the fact that social responsibility is of questionable use to the private individual, who desires sources of pride, institutions to identify with, monuments that celebrate sacrifice, victory, of martyrdom. For this, and for the powerful desire to know what the past was like, we have the historical novel, although still generally dependent on the Historical Past for the broad frame work of any tale. We have a Practical Past. The historical explains, the practical enlivens.

The Impractical Past, however, by frustrating any certainty that the past is meaningful or inspirational, complicates social responsibility by reminding us, if we choose to consider its plausibility, that history may offer us no meaning that we do not bring to it. Theodor Lessing's book *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen* (1919), came a year after Oswald Spengler's first volume of *The Decline of the West* (1918, 1922) and the latter work asserted an abundance of meaning. Lessing's title (*History as Giving Meaning to the Meaningless*) makes clear his view that our understanding of history is a reaction to the apprehension of its meaninglessness.

This was Hayden White's position 63 years after Lessing and 42 years ago.(White 1987, 72). As if to demonstrate by a sublime prolepsis the illusion of change, the example that White developed at length (42 years ago!) was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His foreshadowed argument stands. Who is to say, he asked, that the Israeli treatment of Palestinians is based on a "distorted conception of history." It may be seen as a "morally responsible response" to the meaninglessness of their particular situation. And, he adds, the Palestinian response has precisely the same moral justification -- that is, as an effort to create meaning where none was given. (White, 1987, p. 80). This suppression of the historical sublime in favor of the opposing certitudes is "the sole basis for the proud claim to social responsibility in modern capitalist as well as in communist societies(White, 1987, p. 75). The stories we create are what make us responsible.

Humility: History as Sideshadows

To conclude, I return to the statements I have quoted from Kuukkanen and Schapiro.

Kuukkanen describes the uncertain status of the present, which, although not as unusual as he suggests, offers us a variety of possibilities -- sideshadows - that may (or may not) foreshadow a future path that will beautify or give coherent meaning to the discourse of historical theory. If and when that future path is established, the moment Kuukkanen describes will be backshadowed and shown to have led inevitably to a later situation. That is what historical explanation does by downplaying the sideshadowing possibilities as *ir*responsible.

Schapiro reminds us in a declarative, backshadowing sort of way that the nineteenth century chose, for the most part, to favor the beautiful in creating the knowledge institutions, such as history, that we think of as responsible. It did this, in part, by banishing the historical reader as a free and fully active partner, for whom reflecting about the discourse and its claim to truth was more important than its institutionally certified truth. (Gossman, 1990, p. 244) And so, historians -- in order to qualify as properly professional -- are taught, as Dominick LaCapra put it, not to read, which might open up a multitude of contradictory but plausible explanatory possibilities - in the terms presented in this essay, as sideshadows. (LaCapra, 1983, 339). Our responsibility as citizens, as the concept of citizenship developed through the century, depended on both a Historical Past and a Practical Past, as different as they are. An Impractical Past, however, evoking a "sublime historical experience" in the reader, to borrow Frank Ankersmit's term, was and remains irresponsible.

It is, nevertheless, irresponsible and impractical for only so long. If history-as-event - foreshadowing and backshadowing -- is without meaning, as Theodor Lessing proposed in his too-little-known book, why do we relentlessly create plots, characters, chapters, eras, to give it the form it lacks in and of itself? Why the Anthropocene? Why the Middle Ages? Why the Middle East? And for whom? In other words, why does narrative and its beautification always win? If we banish it, it always creeps back. I don't know why, but I could produce all sorts of explanations that would beautify beautification. And that is not my purpose here. I want to disrupt the process just a bit by bring to the table sideshadows and the sublime of which they are part.

Why does this matter to the theory of history? A discussion might begin with two replies. First, the historical sublime works to *defamiliarize* the conventional ways of thinking about the past. We think about historical theory, like Natasha in *War and Peace*, bewildered at the strangeness of her first opera, this is what it is, this is what it has to be. (Kellner, 2023) Conventions, institutions, publications, fellowships, debates, "international networks," and so forth are all historical productions that have merged from the infinity of possiblities or accidents. To think of our world as a part of a vast, even sublime, set of sideshadows - possibilities -, some realized but most not

realized, leads to the consideration of a different kind of responsibility and to my second point, our need for *humility*.

The humility proper to the historian is a key to understanding responsibilty. The sublime that overwhelms is always overcome in "our world," by the appeals of the present sideshadows which drown out other possibilites. "Our world" is actually "my world," different from your world and millions of other worlds that I can never know nor speak to or for. They are like the *advent*, the vast flow of all events through time, which history tries to make into beautiful tableaux (in Kant's sense of bounded and clear). That is, again, desublimation, and a noble endeavor. But the humility that the historical sublime may bring, at least in some of its forms, is a legitimate responsibilty and we lose something by ignoring it. The historical sublime matters because it questions our desire to explain, banish the sideshadows, and make the present a firm foundation for understaning the past and pointing toward the future. To suggest that it is neither, it complicates our self-important need to be responsible. When we are struck by the sublime, we face an inexplicable present of sideshadows. Explanation falters. But, as we are human with the need to beautify by narration, not for long.

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