



A New Intellectual History?

Russell Jacoby

The American Historical Review, Volume 97, Issue 2 (Apr., 1992), 405-424.

Your use of the JSTOR database indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use. A copy of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use is available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>, by contacting JSTOR at jstor-info@umich.edu, or by calling JSTOR at (888)388-3574, (734)998-9101 or (FAX) (734)998-9113. No part of a JSTOR transmission may be copied, downloaded, stored, further transmitted, transferred, distributed, altered, or otherwise used, in any form or by any means, except: (1) one stored electronic and one paper copy of any article solely for your personal, non-commercial use, or (2) with prior written permission of JSTOR and the publisher of the article or other text.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The American Historical Review is published by The American Historical Association. Please contact the publisher for further permissions regarding the use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/aha.html>.

The American Historical Review
©1992 The American Historical Association

JSTOR and the JSTOR logo are trademarks of JSTOR, and are Registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. For more information on JSTOR contact jstor-info@umich.edu.

©2000 JSTOR

AHR Forum
A New Intellectual History?

RUSSELL JACOBY

GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT SCHOLARLY DISCIPLINES require audacity. Abundant materials and findings of even small fields undermine, if not refute, generalizations. Who can keep up? In a single year (1987), scholars published 215 articles on John Milton, 132 on Henry James, and 554 on William Shakespeare.¹ "The sheer bulk of material being published," remarked Robert Markley, editor of the journal *The Eighteenth Century*, "means that it is almost physically impossible to read as fast as new readings are mass-produced."² Statements about "the" direction of Edmund Burke or Shakespeare studies inevitably seem misleading or wrong; several, perhaps scores, of specialists contradict a summary of the field.

Intellectual history is no different; generalizations about its direction or contours seem arbitrary. Although small, the field seems too large to permit valid statements about its direction. Is there a turn toward rhetorical studies? A revival of contextual approaches to great figures? A shift to popular ideas of social groups? These questions seem to sabotage clear answers. The matter always seems to depend on who is looking where.

For teachers, especially in graduate programs, at least one honorable reason justifies the slippery effort to reflect on and over a field: the need to educate others (and self).³ In addition, a unique reason spurs reflections on intellectual history: a nagging sense of decline.⁴ To prove a decay of intellectual history

¹ Edward B. Fiske, "Lessons," *New York Times* (August 2, 1989): B8.

² Robert Markley, "Stop the Presses: A Modest Proposal for Sa(l)vaging Literary Scholarship," *Eighteenth Century*, 29 (1988): 72. "It becomes increasingly difficult to decide what to read; confronted by the twenty-five entries in the 1984 *MLA Bibliography* under *Macbeth*, how can one decide which books and articles are worth reading?"; p. 72.

³ Another motivation surfaces: the desire to preserve or expand a professional field. Education passes into fief building: define a field so it (and its students) can survive and perhaps prosper. "I dislike to yield territory to sociologists, political scientists, etc.," wrote Frederick Jackson Turner, "on which the historian may raise good crops." Turner in a letter, September 5, 1914; cited by Michael Kammen, *Selvages and Biases: The Fabric of History in American Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1987), 78. Dominick LaCapra admits that his own concerns about intellectual history partly bear witness to "an obvious territorial imperative." LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, 1983), 24.

⁴ "Decline from what?" or "From when?" it might be asked. Some date modern intellectual history from James Harvey Robinson's course at Columbia University before World War I; for instance, see Franklin L. Baumer, "Intellectual History and Its Problems," *Journal of Modern History*, 21 (1949): 191. Others look to Vernon L. Parrington's two volumes, *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York, 1927). Still others look to Arthur O. Lovejoy, his teachings, writings, and organizations. See Dorothy Stimson, "The History of Ideas Club," in George Boas, *et al.*, *Studies in Intellectual History* (Baltimore, Md., 1953), 174-96. In any event, John Higham, who has been monitoring its health for

convincingly is probably impossible—and unnecessary. It suffices to note that for some years social history attracted younger scholars and more attention. Intellectual historians were, or felt, neglected and excluded. Dominick LaCapra complained that intellectual history has been “relatively marginal to the discipline of history.”⁵ Referring to the “monumental bromide” that history has “many mansions,” he declared in the mid-1980s that “today social history tends to occupy many of the mansions and intellectual history a number of the shacks.”⁶ This perception—true or false—has inspired many articles about the “crisis” of intellectual history.⁷

Inasmuch as it forced intellectual historians to reconsider their identities—are they social historians *manqués* or something else?—the decline fostered an advance. “With a mixture of trepidation and excitement,” Martin Jay observes, intellectual historians have joined “the maelstrom of theoretical disputation that now characterizes the humanities as a whole.”⁸ John E. Toews remarks on “a new self-confidence” and a new common orientation among intellectual historians;

forty-odd years, reported that “as late as 1934,” an official bibliography of the American Historical Association ignored intellectual history. Higham, “The Rise of American Intellectual History,” *AHR*, 56 (April 1951): 462. Over the next decades, however, the cumulative impact of Charles Beard, Robinson, Parrington, Perry Miller, Merle Curti, Arthur Schlesinger, and others took effect. By the later 1940s, the quantity and quality increased to the point that some commentators believed intellectual history was “the profession’s outstanding achievement of the last decade.” Higham quoting Thomas Cochran in Higham, “Rise of American Intellectual History,” 467. In the 1950s, one historian referred to “the rapid rise of intellectual history to prominence in the world of American scholarship.” John C. Greene, “Objectives and Methods in Intellectual History,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 44 (1957–58): 58. Another noted it “has never been more popular. It attracts increasing numbers of students who regularly produce a sizeable body of very creditable work.” R. Richard Wohl, “Intellectual History: An Historian’s View,” *The Historian*, 16 (1953): 62.

⁵ Dominick LaCapra, *Soundings in Critical Theory* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989), 199.

⁶ Dominick LaCapra, “On Grubbing in My Personal Archives: An Historiographical Exposé of Sorts,” *Boundary 2*, 13 (1985): 59.

⁷ Announcements of a “crisis” in the field started appearing in the late 1960s and intensified over the next fifteen years. By the early 1970s, Higham wrote of the field having “passed the zenith of its influence.” “American Historiography in the 1960’s,” in John Higham, *Writing American History: Essays on Modern Scholarship* (Bloomington, Ind., 1970), 169. A report from 1975 observed a “crisis” and malaise in that young scholars no longer specialize in intellectual history. “The field was no longer rising, but rapidly declining.” Gene Wise, “The Contemporary Crisis in Intellectual History Studies,” *Clio*, 5 (1975): 55. Intellectual history, offered another historian, “now seems as dated as narrow ties.” Paul K. Conkin, “Intellectual History: Past, Present, and Future,” in *The Future of History*, Charles F. Delzell, ed. (Nashville, Tenn., 1977), 111. Laurence Veysey’s survey of American historical scholarship in 1979 celebrated the productivity and diversity of American historians—and used the declining field of intellectual history to prove his point. “In 1976 some thirty-five to forty [book] titles alone were published in the rather arcane and unfashionable subfield of American intellectual history, an area that some scholars pronounce to be dying.” Veysey, “The United States,” in *International Handbook of Historical Studies*, Georg G. Iggers and Harold T. Parker, eds. (Westport, Conn., 1979), 157. A year after Veysey, Robert Darnton confirmed that disease had struck the field. “The trend toward self-doubt and beleaguered self-assertion can be found wherever intellectual historians discuss the state of their craft.” Once, intellectual historians, he observed, “saw their discipline as the queen of the historical sciences.” Now they have been dethroned and humbled. Darnton, “Intellectual and Cultural History,” in *The Past before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, Michael Kammen, ed. (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980), 327. The next year, William J. Bouwsma confirmed the diagnosis. “The decline of intellectual history appears obvious, and probably irreversible.” Bouwsma, “From History of Ideas to History of Meaning” (1981) in his *A Usable Past: Essays in European Cultural History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1990), 337.

⁸ Martin Jay, “The Textual Approach to Intellectual History,” in *Fact and Fiction: German History and Literature 1848–1924*, Gisela Brude-Firna and Karin J. MacHardy, eds. (Tübingen, 1990), 77.

they accept "semiological theory in which language is conceived of as a self-contained system of 'signs.'"⁹ Michael Ermarth concurs. "There are now compelling reasons to speak definitely of 'old' and 'new' styles of European intellectual history." We are "in the midst of a shift in 'episteme.'"¹⁰

Several historians have spearheaded the rethinking of intellectual history. Among these, perhaps the most committed is Hayden White. "No one writing in this country at the present time," LaCapra has stated, "has done more to wake historians from their dogmatic slumber than has Hayden White . . . One might, without undue hyperbole, say that White's writings have helped to reopen the possibility of thought in intellectual history."¹¹ Allan Megill has judged White's *Metahistory* as "clearly the most important work" in its field "published in the last generation."¹² A continuity marks White's work; he has always grappled with the venerable issue of the specificity of history.¹³ His earlier contributions explored the relationship of history and science; he translated (or co-translated) two books on this topic, *From History to Sociology* (1959) by the Italian Crocean, Carlo Antoni, and *Human Sciences and Philosophy* (1969) by the French Marxist, Lucien Goldmann. Against the claims of the positive sciences, both books defended the uniqueness (and superiority) of history.

With chapters on Wilhelm Dilthey, Ernst Troeltsch, Friedrich Meinecke, and Max Weber, Antoni argued that German thought "declined" from historicism to sociology; invariant categories surrendered the flux and change of history.¹⁴ Antoni faulted Dilthey for substituting a vacant typology in which "the types are always the same" for a "concept of becoming." Weber's sociology expressed "an epoch which has ceased to believe in history and has banished ideas of development, unfolding and progress to a place among the myths of optimism." Antoni concluded his discussion of Dilthey this way: "Once the real movement and novelty of history were denied, it was inevitable that history be transformed into typology and sociology . . . Dilthey in his uncertainty, oscillation and desperation

⁹ John E. Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn," *AHR*, 92 (October 1987): 881-82.

¹⁰ Michael Ermarth, "Mindful Matters: The Empire's New Codes and the Plight of Modern European Intellectual History," *Journal of Modern History*, 57 (1985): 507. For a very different perspective, see the spirited exchange between F. R. Ankersmit and Perez Zagorin. Ankersmit, "Historiography and Postmodernism," *History and Theory*, 28 (1989): 137-53; Zagorin, "Historiography and Postmodernism: Reconsiderations," and Ankersmit, "Reply to Professor Zagorin," both in *History and Theory*, 29 (1990): 263-96. See also the discussion in *Theory and Society*, in which Fritz Ringer argues for a more sociological intellectual history. Ringer, "The Intellectual Field, Intellectual History, and the Sociology of Knowledge," Charles Lemert, "The Habits of Intellectuals," Martin Jay, "Fieldwork and Theorizing in Intellectual History," and a "Rejoinder" by Ringer, all in *Theory and Society*, 19 (1990): 269-334. For a judicious overview, see Donald R. Kelley, "Horizons of Intellectual History: Retrospect, Circumspect, Prospect," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 48 (1987): 143-69.

¹¹ LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 72.

¹² Allan Megill, Review Essay on Theodore Hamerow, *Reflections on History and Historians*, in *History and Theory*, 27 (1987): 98.

¹³ See Hans Kellner, "A Bedrock of Order: Hayden White's Linguistic Humanism," for a different view of White's development, in Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison, Wis., 1989), esp. 193-202.

¹⁴ For a good overview of Antoni, see Antonino Pagliaro, "Ricordo di Carlo Antoni," in Carlo Antoni, *Storicismo e antistoricismo* (Naples, 1964), 3-32. See also Gennaro Sasso, *L'illusione della dialettica: Profilo di Carlo Antoni* (Rome, 1982), esp. 39-72; and Michele Biscione, *Interpreti di Croce* (Naples, 1968), 95-187, which stresses Antoni's links to Benedetto Croce.

foreshadowed a crisis . . . In the throes of that crisis, the German intellectual world turned to the interpretation of history and life in a skeptical and relativistic mood."¹⁵

In a translator's introduction, White echoed these fairly desperate words as he outlined three forms of historicism. One dissolves history into the natural sciences; another unifies history and science by timeless metaphysical principles. In negating human responsibility and freedom, these historicisms were determinist and "vicious." However, a third form, what he called "aesthetic historicism," won White's sympathies; affirming "man's freedom and individual creativity," this historicism assumed that "a true vision of history must begin . . . with the subject, the historian living in the present." But it "went too far," White added, "abandoning reason completely."¹⁶ White's discussion remained vague, since individual historians went virtually unnamed. Dramatically (and elusively), he charged that all these historicisms expressed "partial views and thus unhealthy views, and this unhealthiness was manifested in the violence and anarchy that they spawned or justified."¹⁷

White's subsequent writings remain loyal to the fundamental ideas of Antoni or Goldmann.¹⁸ He defends historical knowledge as exceptional, and he resists subordinating history to science. Within this continuity, however, White's idiom and position have shifted. This can be put in two different ways; either he classifies history as a literary endeavor or he considers all the humanities essentially literary. He chips away at the uniqueness of history in order to accent its links to literature and literary criticism. This means that the stuff of literature—subjectivity, language, and rhetoric—is the stuff of history.

Two essays from the later 1960s, "The Burden of History" (1966) and "The Tasks of Intellectual History" (1969), might be regarded as White's prolegomenon to a new intellectual history; his tentative and earlier formulations became confident, even militant. In the first, he set forth the problem: for over a century, historians have defended themselves from scientists who derided their discipline as vague and subjective. The historians replied that history was not an exact

¹⁵ Carlo Antoni, *From History to Sociology: The Transition in German Historical Thinking*, Hayden V. White, trans. (Detroit, Mich., 1959), vii, 32, 167, 38.

¹⁶ White, "Translator's Introduction," Antoni, *From History to Sociology*, xix–xx, xxi–xxii.

¹⁷ White, "Translator's Introduction," xxiv. Of course, White may be referring to the knotty issue of historical thought and Nazism. To follow Georg Iggers, with Heidegger and others, "historicism . . . reached the end of its road: the last eternal values and meanings had dissolved. All that was left was historical, temporal, and relative." Iggers, *The German Conception of History* (Middletown, Conn., 1968), 244–45.

¹⁸ White wrote no introduction to the Goldmann text (Lucien Goldmann, *The Human Sciences and Philosophy*, Hayden V. White and Robert Anchor, trans. [London, 1969]), but he discussed Goldmann in an essay published the same year as his translation: Hayden White, "The Tasks of Intellectual History," *The Monist*, 53 (1969): esp. 623–25. In general, Goldmann, influenced by Georg Lukács and other Western Marxists, argued for the importance and meaning of history. "We are here concerned with a fundamental difference between history, which studies human behavior and the physico-chemical sciences, which study inanimate matter. The physico-chemical sciences study facts solely in their external or sensible aspect; the historian deals with consciously realized actions . . . of which he must, above all, discover the *meaning* . . . and an *objective* meaning which often differs from the conscious meaning in an important way." Goldmann, *Human Sciences and Philosophy*, 32–33. For a good overview of Goldmann, see his *Cultural Creation in Modern Society*, Bart Grahl, trans. (Oxford, 1977), esp. the intro. by William Mayrl, 3–29; and Mary Evans, *Lucien Goldmann: An Introduction* (Sussex, 1981).

science like physics but "a kind of art." Yet, when reproached by literary artists for failure to appropriate literary modes, the historians backtrack, claiming their field is a science and "historical data do not lend themselves to 'free' artistic manipulation."¹⁹

For White, this position no longer satisfies. It irritates both scientists and artists, and it insulates historians from the latest artistic and scientific developments. In short, history's mediating position between science and art is obsolete. The conclusion? Historians must embrace modern art and literature (and to some extent modern science). When historians defend the "art" of history, however, they usually envision nineteenth-century realism. They remain fixated on "antiquated notions" and "outmoded conceptions of objectivity." Modern art has long surrendered the pretense of realism and objectivity. Historians must do the same.²⁰

This entails realizing that historical "explanation" is not exhausted by the "category of literally truthful" but can be judged by the "richness of the metaphors." "Methodological and stylistic cosmopolitanism" necessitates understanding that "there is no such thing as a *single* correct view of any object under study, but that there are *many* correct views, each requiring its own style of representation." Recognizing facts is "the problem that the historian, like the artist, has tried to solve in the choice of the metaphor." While White alludes to the problem of "radical relativism," he believes this program will allow historians to rejoin the artistic and intellectual dialogue of our time.²¹

"The Tasks of Intellectual History" signaled a more politically radical White dissatisfied with "the pessimistic and accommodationist tone of intellectual historiography." Nietzschean and Marxist tones permeated his essay. "Intellectual history is rather like vicarious sex: neither satisfying nor, ultimately, very helpful as a guide to action . . . [I]ntellectual history substitutes for the color of the market place, the battlefield, and the parliament, the odor of the study, the library, and the academic hall." He bemoaned the fact that the historical profession saddled intellectual history with conventional methods; when intellectual historians advance new perspectives, they must buck "*the essentially antitheoretical bias that prevails in the profession at large.*"²²

White's *Metahistory* (1973) presented the ideas he had developed over the previous six years.²³ All history contains a "deep" verbal structure; this structure or metahistorical element shapes the histories. Exactly how White proceeds to analyze this structure is complicated and, at times, byzantine; for instance, he

¹⁹ Hayden White, "The Burden of History" (1966), in his *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, Md., 1978), 27.

²⁰ White, "Burden of History," 29, 42–43. White discussed *Life against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History* (1959) by Norman O. Brown (then his colleague at the University of Rochester) as exemplifying a new artistic history. "By a series of brilliant and shocking juxtapositions, involutions, reductions, and distortions," he "forces the reader to see with new clarity"; p. 45.

²¹ White, "Burden of History," 47–48.

²² White, "Tasks of Intellectual History," 608, 609–10, 616, italics in original.

²³ Richard T. Vann argues that Louis O. Mink's work, for instance, his essay "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension" (1970), played a key role in White's ideas; see Vann's "Louis Mink's Linguistic Turn," *History and Theory*, 26 (1987): esp. 5–8. One element from White's earlier program no longer appears in his later writings: the almost "new age" hope expressed in "The Burden of History" that history will embrace contemporary science as well as art.

finds sixty-four varieties of historical writing.²⁴ The main argument, however, is sufficiently clear. All history is inextricably poetic and linguistic; it interprets and molds facts, more than discovering or finding them. For this reason, histories can be approached as literature and analyzed using tropes of poetic language (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony). This means—among other things—that no single history is more “realistic” than any other. “The best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral.”²⁵

In his essays from the mid-1970s, White elaborated on these ideas, championing a method underlining language, style, metaphor, and rhetorical strategies. “There has been a reluctance,” White wrote in “Historical Text as Literary Artifact” (1974) “to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.”²⁶

While White does not dismiss the “found” or factual dimension of history, he directs our attention to that formed or imagined by the historian. For instance, in a brief analysis, White argues that E. P. Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class* is a contrived work; Thompson “makes” the English working class by consciously or unconsciously utilizing a basic tropic model in which “groups actually pass in a finite movement from a naive to an ironic condition in their evolution.” He has “lingered” on the “tropological unpacking of the structure of Thompson’s discourse,” White states, because Thompson “claims” to be studying “concrete historical reality.”²⁷

White’s contribution harbors many virtues; he forces historians to rethink their relationship to literature and style. “History as a discipline is in bad shape today,”

²⁴ White distinguished five levels in all historical work: chronicle, story, emplotment, argument, ideology. The first two involve how events are organized. The “plot” (or emplotment), however, is more decisive, since it is the manner in which the historian gives meaning to the chronicle/story. Following Northrop Frye, White suggests at least four different emplotments: romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire. “A given historian is forced to emplot the whole set of stories making up his narrative in one comprehensive or *archetypal* story form”; p. 8. Beyond the emplotment lies the explicit argument or the explanation, which are founded on “different notions of the nature of historical reality”; p. 13. White distinguished four types of historical explanation: formist, organicist, mechanistic, and contextualist. On the last level, the ideological, White also posited four types: anarchist, conservatism, radicalism, and liberalism. While there appear to be sixty-four possibilities—four different emplotments, explanations, and ideologies—White suggested elective and homological affinities exist among these levels; p. 29. In any event, White went on to state that a “particular combination of modes of emplotment, argument and ideological implication” makes up a “historiographical style.” This style is fundamentally linguistic and poetic, and was White’s real concern. It also can be classified in four ways, using the four basic literary tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. In his essential book *In Defence of Rhetoric*, Brian Vickers judges severely White’s fetish of “four,” especially his reduction of rhetoric to four tropes. This he regards as of a piece with the “reduction, fragmentation, and misapplication of rhetoric in modern literary discourse.” Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford, 1989), 441–42, 453. Another historian of rhetoric, Nancy S. Struever, makes a similar and equally tough assessment of White; see her “Topics in History,” in *Metahistory: Six Critiques, History and Theory*, Beiheft 19 (1980): 66–79.

²⁵ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, Md., 1973), xii.

²⁶ White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 82.

²⁷ Hayden White, Introduction: “Tropology, Discourse, and the Modes of Human Consciousness,” in White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 15–19.

he writes, "because it has lost sight of its origins in the literary imagination. In the interests of *appearing* scientific and objective, it has repressed and denied to itself its own greatest source of strength and renewal."²⁸ White insists that rhetorical choices saturate the historical project; all facts and accounts are already interpretations and decisions. His works compel historians to attend to their initial and fundamental preconceptions. This is all to the good.

However, his contribution also tilts toward relativism and, perhaps more serious, toward formalism. White almost bites the relativistic bullet. Historical material does not dictate anything; the historian selects and interprets. "Historical situations do not have built into them intrinsic meanings . . . Historical situations are not *inherently* tragic, comic or romantic . . . All the historian needs to do to transform a tragic into a comic situation is to shift his point of view . . . *How* a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian's subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with a meaning of a particular kind. This is essentially a literary, that is to say fiction-making, operation."²⁹

The problem is evident: insofar as intrinsic meaning is depreciated, the historian's discourse is elevated; the key is how he or she "emplots" material. The stuff of history can be plotted in numerous ways, dependent on skill. Does this mean that all histories are equally true and false? These objections are familiar to White. "I have never denied that knowledge of history, culture, and society was possible; I have only denied that a scientific knowledge, of the sort actually attained in the study of physical nature, was possible."³⁰ Or he writes that he acknowledges that "historical events" differ from "fictional events." What interests him are "the fictions of factual representation"—the way history and fiction "overlap, resemble or correspond with each other."³¹

Even as he seeks to avoid slipping into complete relativism, White comes exceedingly close. His essay "The Politics of Historical Interpretation" (1982) addresses the professionalization of history, which for White entails the "repression" of history's utopian, imaginary, and sublime moments. "Imagination is disciplined by its subordination to the rules of evidence." Conservatives, radicals, and Marxists rejected a "visionary politics" developed by Romantic and marginal thinkers—Jules Michelet, Friedrich Schiller, Friedrich Nietzsche—and by fascists. "We must guard against a sentimentalism that would lead us to write off such a conception of history simply because it has been associated with fascist ideologies. One must face the fact that when it comes to apprehending the historical record, there are no grounds to be found in the historical record itself for preferring one way of construing its meaning over another."³²

White digs a hole for himself and strains to climb out—unsuccessfully, accord-

²⁸ Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *Tropics of Discourse*, 99.

²⁹ White, "Historical Text," *Tropics of Discourse*, 85.

³⁰ White, "Introduction," *Tropics of Discourse*, 23.

³¹ Hayden White, "The Fictions of Factual Representation," in *Tropics of Discourse*, 121.

³² Hayden White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation," in White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, Md., 1987), 67, 72, 74–75. It is always tempting to turn the rhetoric of the rhetoricians against themselves. The critic of "facts" says here, "One must face the fact . . . there are no grounds." What fact?

ing to Carlo Ginzburg, who almost indicts White for succumbing to a Gentilean subjectivism and fascism.³³ Though politically the most explosive issue, relativism hardly exhausts the problems with White's *oeuvre*; moreover, it might divert attention from weaknesses more germane to intellectual history—White's formalism.

His formalism is explicit: White occasionally refers to himself as a "formalist." "My method, in short, is formalist."³⁴ The implications are not spelled out, however. "The tropological theory of discourse," states White, "could provide us with a way of classifying different kinds of discourses by reference to the linguistic modes that predominate in them rather than by reference to supposed 'contents' which are always identified differently by different interpreters."³⁵ The promise here is clear: abandon the "contents" (in quotes since they cannot really be established) for the linguistic structure. The problem is also clear: critical scrutiny and evaluation turn into categorizing. In looking at historical work, the questions become, how do we classify it? What are its principal tropes?³⁶

The relationship of categorizing to wider knowledge cannot be discussed in a brief compass—and probably no extended discussion suffices inasmuch as this relationship varies by the field of knowledge. For the humanities, categorizing tends to be insufficient, if not inadequate and superficial; it remains external, appraising structure and types. It smacks of a static, nonhistorical approach. It becomes formalistic.³⁷ White once knew this, since he criticized Arthur O. Lovejoy and Ernst Cassirer for this failing: "Their organizational principles are uniformly typological . . . [O]n the whole they avoided the problem of intellectual historical dynamics. They tended to view the history of consciousness as an intra-mural or domestic affair within consciousness itself."³⁸

Now White seems to do this himself. "A semiological approach to the study of texts," he writes, "permits us to moot the question of the text's reliability as witness to events or phenomena extrinsic to it, to pass over the question of the text's 'honesty,' its objectivity . . . This is to shift hermeneutic interest from the content of the texts being investigated to their formal properties."³⁹

³³ See Carlo Ginzburg's critique of White, "Just One Witness"; and commentary by Martin Jay, "Of Plots, Witnesses and Judgements: An Answer to Hayden White and Carlo Ginzburg" (unpublished papers). At least part of White's argument is neither wrong nor new; it has often been discussed that fascism and Nazism successfully exploited a mythic dimension that liberals, conventional conservatives, and Marxists abandoned. For instance, this argument has long marked the writings of George L. Mosse; see *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York, 1977). See also Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (1984; Cambridge, 1986), esp. chap. 1. Yet White seems to be stating something more than this—or perhaps less.

³⁴ White, *Metahistory*, 3.

³⁵ White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 21.

³⁶ For a critique of White's tropes for sidestepping the issue of historical truth, see Arnaldo Momigliano, "The Rhetoric of History and the History of Rhetoric: On Hayden White's Tropes," in *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*, 3, Elinor S. Shaffer, ed. (Cambridge, 1981), 259–68.

³⁷ This is a huge topic. There are innumerable versions of formalism: the formalism of Northrop Frye, New Criticism, and Russian Formalism—and many others. In politics and program, for instance, New Criticism and Russian Formalism seem very different. Nevertheless, they share certain elements. See Ewa M. Thompson, *Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism: A Comparative Study* (The Hague, 1971).

³⁸ White, "Tasks of Intellectual History," 613.

³⁹ White, *Content of the Form*, 192–93.

A fundamental irony colors White's formalism; his *oeuvre* develops out of a tradition underscoring the uniqueness of the humanities (and history). He consistently rejects as misguided efforts to imitate scientific neutrality and objectivity. Yet he bills his formalism as more objective, almost more scientific, than approaches that evaluate contents and contexts; indeed, he seems to dismiss these as impressionistic and subjective. The literary intellectual historian revels in the superiority of a hard-nosed formal and structural method. "The utility" of the semiological analysis, White proclaims, "is to be assessed solely in terms of quantitative criterion, namely, its capacity to account for more of the elements of any given text, of whatever length, than any contending 'content'-orientated method could match."⁴⁰ He offers an example of his method, an inspection of *The Education of Henry Adams*.

In this space, it is possible to comment on only one aspect of White's analysis: his own rhetoric. He assumes the idiom of the cool scientist scoffing at the emotionalism of the artist. He first dissects a 1961 preface to the book by D. W. Brogan, which seems to White completely "impressionistic and unsystematic." "It provides absolutely no criterion for assessing the validity of the various generalizations." Brogan's approach is completely unsuitable "as a model of analysis." It seems totally "arbitrary," based on "personal taste, inclination or ideological commitment." Against this intuitive and subjective commentary, White offers a "semiological perspective" that "can provide a theoretically grounded reading of this text, which would give an account for every element of it."⁴¹

Here, as elsewhere, White sounds like the analytic logician who can finally dispense with cloudy speculations of poet philosophers. The aim of a complete study of *The Education of Henry Adams* would be "to characterize the types of messages emitted in terms of the several codes in which they are cast and to map the relationships among the codes thus identified both as a hierarchy of codes and a sequence of their elaboration."⁴² White's introduction to *Metahistory* is titled "The Poetics of History." But this is the language—and cadence—of aggressive science.⁴³ White's rebellion against positivism ends in a scientific formalism.

WHITE HAS NOT BEEN ALONE in his effort to reorientate intellectual history; by his energy and productivity, Dominick LaCapra has joined and perhaps surpassed him. In the broadest terms, their contributions run parallel. They have both sought to rescue history (and intellectual historians) from a certain unconsciousness; they have forcefully drawn attention to the problems of language and text; they both want to push intellectual history in a literary direction.⁴⁴ Again, it is

⁴⁰ White, *Content of the Form*, 194.

⁴¹ White, *Content of the Form*, 196.

⁴² White, *Content of the Form*, 196–97, 208.

⁴³ In a sympathetic discussion, Reinhart Koselleck calls White's work a "scientifically grounded linguistic metahistory." Koselleck, "Einführung" to White, *Auch Klio dichtet, oder, Die Fiktion des Faktischen: Studien zur Tropologie des historischen Diskurses* (Stuttgart, 1986), 6.

⁴⁴ See generally Lloyd S. Kramer, "Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra," in *The New Cultural History*, Lynn Hunt, ed. (Berkeley, Calif., 1989), 97–128.

difficult to fault the project. Few can object to rethinking assumptions about intellectual history.

While they share an approach, LaCapra hardly follows White. Unlike White, he emphatically identifies with the field of intellectual history and worries about its health. Beginning with his second book, all LaCapra's works directly or indirectly broach questions of the methods and parameters of intellectual history. His book on Jean-Paul Sartre (1978) opens with a discussion of intellectual history.⁴⁵ His most recent collection (1989) closes with an essay, "Intellectual History and Critical Theory."⁴⁶

LaCapra is more pugnacious than White. "I have long felt that the annual convention of the American Historical Association is second only to that of morticians in the liveliness of its addresses and interchanges. A little controversy might . . . be welcomed."⁴⁷ LaCapra enjoys intellectual strife. He defends in a recent essay "the provocative role of hyperbole."⁴⁸ In addition, he boldly tackles subjects that seem especially unsuited for his method: LaCapra admits that Sartre has "explicitly rejected a theory of the text" that he employs.⁴⁹

He is also less systematic than White and, for that reason, is sometimes difficult to follow. This is not a statement about personal style but theoretical orientation. Despite their many similarities, White and LaCapra appeal to different traditions. Both reject a naive, common-sense approach to history; both underscore the linguistic strategies of historical texts. Yet, in conceptualizing these strategies, White looks to the formalism of Northrop Frye, LaCapra to the deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida.⁵⁰ Like Frye, who always had an "obsession with form,"⁵¹ White prizes patterns that he believes structure texts, and, like Derrida, LaCapra challenges systems that he judges float above a text. Derrida's "oft-quoted maxim 'il n'y a pas de hors-texte' (there is no outside-the-text) is not a charter for formalism," LaCapra writes. "It is a critique of the attempt to ground the work and play of textuality in some extratextual foundation."⁵²

On this issue, LaCapra criticizes White. While unstinting in his praise, he also protests that White remains committed to the passive "historical record" and an "idealistic mythology." White fails to appreciate Derrida. For LaCapra, texts and language in White seem too traditional; White avoids the "problem of interplay

⁴⁵ The first words (of the main text) of his Sartre book run, "Intellectual history has often followed . . ."; Dominick LaCapra, *A Preface to Sartre* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1978), 19.

⁴⁶ Dominick LaCapra, "Intellectual History and Critical Theory," in *Soundings in Critical Theory*, 182–209.

⁴⁷ LaCapra, "On Grubbing in My Personal Archives," 46.

⁴⁸ LaCapra, *Soundings in Critical Theory*, 2.

⁴⁹ LaCapra, *Preface to Sartre*, 23.

⁵⁰ In keeping with his more rigorous formalism, White also refuses to distinguish between high and popular culture. "The linguistic model provides us with a basis for dissolving the distinction, hierarchial and essentialist in nature, between high culture on the one side and low, folk or popular culture on the other. This distinction . . . precludes the possibility of a genuine science of culture." Hayden White, "Structuralism and Popular Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 7 (1974): 775. LaCapra resists losing all these differences, however; see, for instance, Dominick LaCapra, "Culture and Ideology," in LaCapra, *Soundings in Critical Theory*, 133–54.

⁵¹ A. C. Hamilton, *Northrop Frye: Anatomy of His Criticism* (Toronto, 1990), 40.

⁵² Dominick LaCapra, "Criticism Today," *Soundings in Critical Theory*, 19.

between structure and play in the text and one's relation to it"; he misses "the tense interplay among elements in the language of the text."⁵³

This is a persistent note in LaCapra, almost an anti-dogmatic dogma. Time and again, he insists on the complexities, ambiguities, and tensions of "the text." For instance, in *A Preface to Sartre*, he complains that "ambiguity is domesticated and controlled [in Sartre] by its insertion into the totalizing human project." LaCapra objects that "what is almost invariably left in the dark or repressed by Sartre is the intercourse between structure and play in his own use of language." His criticism of Sartre appeals to what LaCapra calls Derrida's "'minimal' program" that posits "the contest and contestation between structure and play." For this approach, Sartre's life can be ignored, since it offers few clues to his thought. "Sartre remains too much the same and does not change enough—at least as far as his writing is concerned."⁵⁴

LaCapra's next major effort examined the trial of Gustave Flaubert in 1857, a terrain in which "intellectual history and literary history converge." He explains that a trial "is a locus of social reading that brings out conventions of interpretation in a key institution." Indeed, he offers his book as a "test case" of his methodological program.⁵⁵ Is he successful? LaCapra's energy and devotion are admirable; his commitment to a close textual reading can hardly be faulted. For instance, he inspects the novel's dedication to Flaubert's lawyer, who defended the author when the government charged that *Madame Bovary* offended public morality; and LaCapra finds some extra punctuation in the translation. "Paul de Man, in his 'substantially new translation' of the novel, has introduced into the dedication six commas more than Flaubert himself used, thereby accentuating one's doubts about its intention."⁵⁶

Some of LaCapra's main points seem unexceptional. The trial "reduced the radical negativity of the novel to manageable proportions either to condemn or to praise its author."⁵⁷ For LaCapra, these juridical "readings" avoid the novel's seditiousness. Yet it is hardly surprising that neither the prosecutor nor defense went beyond a simple interpretation of *Madame Bovary*; neither were, or wanted to be, literary critics. They argued whether the book offended public morality by celebrating adultery. For LaCapra, this showed a superficial understanding of the novel.

LaCapra believes that *Madame Bovary* is marked by shifting narrative voices creating an "indeterminacy" that "unsettles the moral security of the reader." LaCapra has much to say about Flaubert's "dual style" and a variant of it, his "free indirect style," which also undermines a simple reading of the book. In fact, LaCapra has so much to say about Flaubert's style that, except in passing, he never returns to Flaubert's trial. Occasionally, he mentions that "the trial of course did not investigate the problem of the so-called free indirect style." In the conclusion,

⁵³ Dominick LaCapra, "A Poetics of Historiography: Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse*," in *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 80–81.

⁵⁴ LaCapra, *Preface to Sartre*, 90, 26, 223, 39.

⁵⁵ Dominick LaCapra, "Madame Bovary" on Trial (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), 7, 10.

⁵⁶ LaCapra, "Madame Bovary" on Trial, 53.

⁵⁷ LaCapra, "Madame Bovary" on Trial, 53, 54.

he reiterates that in understanding *Madame Bovary* neither the prosecutor nor defense "went beyond viewing the issue of standard conformity or deviance."⁵⁸

To be just a little unfair, the trial of Flaubert was for LaCapra a foil or excuse for a literary analysis of *Madame Bovary*. His learned and engaged discussion draws on numerous critics as well as Flaubert's letters and a few events of 1848. But LaCapra is not very interested in the trial or even in historically situating Flaubert's style. He analyzes Flaubert's style as found in *Madame Bovary*. "My own argument," he concludes, "has been that the problem of narration or modes of 'representation' in *Madame Bovary* is indeed complex . . . One minimal point I have tried to establish is that one cannot simply take the most lapidary statements concerning pure art . . . from the letters [of Flaubert] and interpret the novel as their unproblematic realization."⁵⁹ In his essays and books, LaCapra continuously repeats this "minimal point": texts cannot be reduced to other texts or contexts; texts are complex. As a method, this appears to be beyond dispute; no one wants to promote reductionism. Yet LaCapra's position becomes a dogma, a methodological pronouncement that sabotages interpretations.

LaCapra shares with other new intellectual historians several characteristics. They see themselves as beleaguered, a few rebels facing a powerful and unsympathetic profession. They generally stay clear of direct encounters with other historians; that is, they develop methodological critiques of historians but at arm's length. The method becomes an end in itself. In his major programmatic essay "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts," LaCapra reiterates that intellectual historians have succumbed to various reductionisms: a documentary approach, contextualism, presentism. "The predominance of a documentary approach," LaCapra writes, "is one crucial reason why complex texts—especially 'literary' ones—are either excluded from the relevant historical record or read in an extremely reduced way."⁶⁰ Yet he rarely tells us which historians or what histories are guilty of these sins.

This needs some qualification. The few efforts of new intellectual historians to criticize deficient history do not seem illuminating. The examples are usually secondary or marginal.⁶¹ Apart from briefly discussing E. P. Thompson, in one of his rare bids to demonstrate how "the figurative level of the discourse" guides a modern historian, Hayden White selects a passage from "a no-nonsense purveyor of facts." The passage he chooses comes from A. J. P. Taylor's *Course of German History*.⁶² This is an odd choice. Taylor's book is generally considered extremely tendentious and polemical; few books are less neutral. All the details are marshaled to show that Luther led to Hitler. It takes no great acumen to show that Taylor's language abets his project.

To his credit, LaCapra has sought several direct encounters with writings of other historians. Yet the results are decidedly mixed. Against provocative interpretations, LaCapra argues that texts are complex and indeterminate. He

⁵⁸ LaCapra, "Madame Bovary" on Trial, 60, 127, 210.

⁵⁹ LaCapra, "Madame Bovary" on Trial, 211.

⁶⁰ LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 33.

⁶¹ See Anthony Pagden's comments in "Rethinking the Linguistic Turn: Current Anxieties in Intellectual History," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 49 (1988): 527.

⁶² White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 107–08.

evaluates *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (by Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin), which he states belongs to "the standard repertory of the intellectual historian." The book puts forth "a striking argument" based on a "contextualist approach" that interprets a text by way of other writings and individuals.⁶³ LaCapra finds "extremely reductive" their argument that the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* is fundamentally ethical. "The text becomes a vehicle for ideas, discursive arguments, and essential positions." He objects to their appeal to Karl Kraus, Robert Musil, Wittgenstein's letters, and *fin-de-siècle* Vienna to bolster their case. Yet LaCapra does not go much beyond arguing that Wittgenstein and the *Tractatus* preclude any interpretation. It is fair enough to question Wittgenstein's emphatic statement about the ethical core of the *Tractatus*, but LaCapra seems to prefer ambivalence and indeterminacy.

Does the relation between what Wittgenstein directly and indirectly states, LaCapra asks, "authorize one to say that the text is essentially ethical—or essentially anything else for that matter?" In effect, LaCapra answers negatively; the text is essentially about nothing (or is essentially nothing). Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, like any text, is "the scene of an interplay between different forces—forces of unification and dissemination—whose relation must be taken as a matter of inquiry."⁶⁴ To LaCapra, a convention of historians resembled an assembly of morticians, but here one sniffs the stale air of endless seminars. Nothing is ever figured out or resolved; everything is postponed to next week's meeting.

His critique of Carlo Ginzburg's *Cheese and the Worms* raises valid objections yet returns insistently to the proposition of textual complexity. "My emphasis would be on the complex, often distorted interaction of levels or aspects of culture and the attendant relations between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in social and intellectual life."⁶⁵ Ironically, the critique of Ginzburg by this militantly unconventional or anti-traditional historian could have been made by an ordinary empiricist who prizes facts. LaCapra charges that Ginzburg fails to sift carefully through his texts, generalizes too widely and boldly, is too anecdotal and informal, and does not offer enough evidence. He complains that "the diffuse narrative and anecdotal style [of Ginzburg] facilitates the treatment of it [oral culture] in vague, piecemeal, and allusive terms."⁶⁶

The point is not that LaCapra is wrong but that, in one of the few detailed critiques of other historians, his own position is little more than a call for textual prudence.⁶⁷ Unhappy with Ginzburg's interpretation of an inquisition report, he

⁶³ All citations from Dominick LaCapra, "Reading Exemplars: *Wittgenstein's Vienna* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*," in LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 84–117.

⁶⁴ LaCapra, "Reading Exemplars," 102, 116.

⁶⁵ Dominick LaCapra, "*The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Twentieth-Century Historian*," in his *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), 63.

⁶⁶ LaCapra, "*The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Twentieth-Century Historian*," 55.

⁶⁷ LaCapra has also discussed the work of Carl Schorske, Robert Darnton, and Roger Chartier. See his "Is Everybody a *Mentalité* Case? Transference and the 'Culture' Concept," in his *History and Criticism*; and "Chartier, Darnton and the Great Symbol Massacre," in his *Soundings in Critical Theory*. Again, LaCapra makes some good points, but he repeatedly objects to the reductionist "reading" of texts. "One question that nonetheless rises as Schorske carries out his program," he asks, is whether he "tends to collapse in a reductive direction whereby the artifact or text is explained as a very restricted . . . response to a 'larger context.'" *History and Criticism*, 82. "On a methodological level, an overly reductive process is operative in Darnton's own understanding of reading and symbolic

complains, "At the very least, the reader deserves a transcription of the inquisition register itself to be in a better position to test the use and the interpretation made of it."⁶⁸ LaCapra sounds very much like a traditionalist upset that a researcher has been insufficiently cautious.

As with White, what begins as a call for a radical departure in historical thought closes sounding very familiar: the importance, complexity, and ambiguities of the text are continuously reiterated—a proposition advanced for decades by new and not-so-new literary critics. To be sure, what is familiar is neither bad nor wrong. Yet, as with White, in two respects the circle has been closed. The new intellectual historians undercut emphatic arguments with the truism of textual complexity. The world of interpretations turns gray; everything is complicated, indeterminate, feasible. Moreover, the method becomes the object. LaCapra has criticized the fetish of archives and documents, as if facts themselves advance knowledge and truth; however, he has glorified a textual technique, as if method exists apart from its object.

Might White and LaCapra despite themselves harbor affinities toward a positivist science? The point is not to fling about vague charges over some alleged scientism, as if science were evil. Rather, it is this: White, LaCapra, and other new intellectual historians emerge out of a tradition that sought to rescue, if not cultivate, the uniqueness of history; this project does not entail denigrating science but distinguishing history from its formal, quantifying, and objective elements. Yet the very language of the new intellectual historians (and often the program) smacks of a formalism and objectivity associated with the sciences.

The theorists of a literary intellectual history disdain the "impressionist and unsystematic," White's objection to D. W. Brogan's preface. They want the language of rigor, structure, and technique. Often, LaCapra criticizes a historian's language; he never states that he finds it too literary, but his objections amount to the same. For LaCapra, the idiom seems too pictorial or accessible or subjective. These are defects, which LaCapra implicitly contrasts to language that is abstract, technical, structured—the vocabulary of the professional scholar.

LaCapra criticizes the "premium" bestowed on "straightforward prose (the no-jargon rule)."⁶⁹ He faults "the diffuse narrative and anecdotal style" of Ginzburg's *Cheese and the Worms*.⁷⁰ He protests that Darnton is "too accommodatingly readable," and this style lends itself "to gloss over problems and smooth over knotty points that may call for critical thought."⁷¹ He objects to the conformity of the traditional "men and ideas" intellectual history with its "highly readable but diverting mode of introducing readers to the text."⁷² He finds that Carl Schorske's

meaning." *Soundings in Critical Theory*, 79. LaCapra is responding to Darnton's book, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984), as well as a discussion of it by Darnton and Chartier; the latter's "Text, Symbols and Frenchness," is now in his collection, Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, Lydia G. Cochrane, trans. (Cambridge, 1988), 95–111.

⁶⁸ LaCapra, "The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Twentieth-Century Historian," 63.

⁶⁹ LaCapra, "Intellectual History and Critical Theory," 196.

⁷⁰ LaCapra, "The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Twentieth-Century Historian," 54–55.

⁷¹ LaCapra, "Chartier, Darnton and the Great Symbol Massacre," 82.

⁷² LaCapra, *Preface to Sartre*, 20.

polished style mirrors his simplified vision of Viennese culture. With Schorske, "an almost Viennese flair for the elaborate elegance of the nicely turned phrase and a butterflylike delicacy in moving from *topos* to *topos* . . . engender an enchanting world of words."⁷³ The palpable disdain for the less than technical prose suggests the new intellectual history secretly admires the science it openly rejects.⁷⁴

OTHER HISTORIANS HAVE FOLLOWED OR ACCOMPANIED White and LaCapra in advancing a new intellectual history; unfortunately, their contributions—for instance, Sande Cohen's *Historical Culture*,⁷⁵ Allan Megill's "Recounting the Past: 'Description,' Explanation, and Narrative in Historiography,"⁷⁶ and David Harlan's "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature"⁷⁷—reveal the same ills. These pieces share an extravagant appeal to new theories and approaches, a dramatic portrayal of the depth and power of the opposition to these theories coupled with no clear reference as to who or what constitutes that opposition, and a sketch of a new intellectual history that outlines a new formalism or textual prudence.

Cohen's *Historical Culture*, however, may be *sui generis*. By reason of its dense jargon, *Historical Culture* resists not simply a comparison with other new intellectual histories but any evaluation. Yet it features an enthusiastic blurb by White. "The most original contribution to historiographical theory since Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* . . . A brilliant achievement!" LaCapra also reviewed it generously. "Cohen is on the mark in mounting a sustained critique of the recent overvaluation of narrative, and his plea for theory and criticism is timely and forceful."⁷⁸ And Cohen's main argument parallels that of the other new intellectual historians.

Liberally citing Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, and postmodern French critics, Cohen identifies his work as a "modified version of deconstruction theory." Like other new intellectual historians, he challenges an oppressive order, "academic historiography" that is "part of the overall requirement for cultural stability."⁷⁹ His method—if it can be called that—is formalistic inasmuch as it dissects the language of historians.

Cohen's own language requires more than a passing comment. His prose is so opaque that the book comes with a glossary, but unfortunately the glossary needs a translator or an editor. "Actantial/actant" reads an entry: "refers to the complex exchange between what a 'historical' narration allows to be the subject of doing

⁷³ LaCapra, "Is Everyone a *Mentalité* Case?" 84.

⁷⁴ To be fair, LaCapra has raised the problem of "expertise . . . becoming enclosed in its own dialect or jargon"; see "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts," in his *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 65.

⁷⁵ Sande Cohen, *Historical Culture: On the Recoding of an Academic Discipline* (Berkeley, Calif., 1986).

⁷⁶ Allan Megill, "Recounting the Past: 'Description,' Explanation, and Narrative in Historiography," *AHR*, 94 (June 1989): 627–53.

⁷⁷ David Harlan, "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature," *AHR*, 94 (June 1989): 581–609.

⁷⁸ Dominick LaCapra, in *AHR*, 92 (April 1987): 376. LaCapra also made some serious criticism.

⁷⁹ Cohen, *Historical Culture*, 10, 17.

(for example, capitalism treated as the actant of innovation or capitalism presented as the subject of dialectical transformations) and the reader's ability (generally) to acknowledge primary roles of action as necessary to a culture."⁸⁰ This is Cohen when succinct.

Cohen admits that his terms are "radically unfamiliar," but it "must be so." The usual academic discourse evades and absorbs. His "decoding" requires "a discourse that slows reading, that refuses to convince a reader by its cadence or even rightness." He succeeds in this. "If transcendence is a permanent possibility of semiotic-intellectual destruction," runs a typical sentence, "because its minimal function is to make unthinkable the negation of that 'which ties one to reality' and holds one in place, this superfunction today is perfected in contexts where language is hypervalorized as the 'indispensable,' 'needed,' 'necessary,' 'required,' and so on, basis of enculturation."⁸¹ The question is less Cohen, however; it is whether the concentration on language and texts by the new intellectual historians ignores language and texts—their own. Does their critique of narrative foster the illusion that conceptual subversion requires an unreadable prose? This seems to be the case. Again, the paradox is striking. These historians seek to restore or rethink history's links to the humanities and literature. They want to free history of scientific pretensions; they ponder metaphors, rhetoric, and imagination. Yet they author, even champion, insular and cramped writings distant from literature.

A rare devotion to an argument distinguishes *Historical Culture*. Cohen claws his way through historical texts (by Peter Gay, E. P. Thompson, and Fernand Braudel) sentence by sentence for hundreds of pages. This is no mean achievement; such intensity is typically brought to bear on poetry, short fiction, or the densest philosophy, not the prose of historians. Cohen cannot be charged with avoiding specifics. By virtue of its singlemindedness, *Historical Culture* makes a point. One example must suffice for Cohen's method. He spends well over a page on the first sentence of Peter Gay's appendix to *Weimar Culture*, which reads "The Weimar Republic was proclaimed on November 9, 1918, by the Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann."⁸² Cohen objects to the pretense of neutrality and matter-of-factness: Gay writes neither "'As I hope to prove, the Weimar Republic was proclaimed in order to . . .'" nor "'what was called the Weimar Republic by x.'" Rather, Gay's sentence encourages "passive cognition." "The reader is blocked from considering the status of such namings." The opening sentence, Cohen

⁸⁰ Cohen, *Historical Culture*, 327.

⁸¹ Cohen, *Historical Culture*, 2, 46. "No historian who reads and comprehends this book will ever write in the same way again." Is this blurb of Cohen's book by Professor Mark Poster praise or condemnation?

⁸² Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York, 1968), 147. To be sure, Cohen's choice of writings seems somewhat eccentric, if not misleading. For instance, when he takes up Peter Gay, he does not select Gay's *Freud or Voltaire's Politics* or *Bourgeois Experience* but what he calls a text "representative of historical works read by an audience as a confirmation of the act of synthesis"; p. 110. An inattentive reader might think he is analyzing the conclusion to Gay's *Weimar Culture*, but it is an appendix to that book. Gay directs those "unfamiliar with modern German history" to this appendix but observes that it "obviously makes no claim to originality"; Gay, xv. Cohen employs sixty pages to reflect on this seventeen-page appendix, but he never manages to state the obvious: this text was a minor addition to the main book.

concludes elegantly, is "both a performative (see Barthes) and what Derrida has called a detour for the reappropriation of presence."⁸³

The argument complements that of other new intellectual historians and its truth remains salutary. Narratives suppress issues by carrying along the reader. Even the plainest sentences betray cultural assumptions; and insofar as historians write—or study texts—they must weigh language. This radical insight, however, slides into its opposite: a new cautiousness. Nothing can be stated without multiple qualifications and clauses. Sprinkles of "as I hope to show" and "what is called" or scare quotes around every other word supposedly subvert a passive narrative. LaCapra also backed away from decisive arguments of Ginzburg, Toulmin, and Janik. "As I see it," Cohen writes in his conclusion citing Baudrillard, the historical narratives exclude the "reciprocity and antagonism of interlocutors, in the ambivalence of their exchange." They leave out the questions "'What do you mean by . . . ?'"⁸⁴ These questions are essential, but an obsession with ambivalence and interchanges hardly betters an obsession with clear facts.

David Harlan also wants to restore and rethink the link between history and literature. He writes that "now, after a hundred-year absence, literature has returned to history . . . The return of literature has plunged historical studies into an extended epistemological crisis." Apart from stating that the "return of literature" was "prepared" by Ferdinand de Saussure, Harlan makes no effort to indicate when literature deserted history. What is this "one-hundred year absence"?⁸⁵ Does it include, for instance, Vernon Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought*? In his *American Intellectual Histories and Historians*, Robert Allen Skotheim calls this "no doubt the most famous American history of ideas ever published" and notes that it was frequently criticized for excessively discussing literature.⁸⁶ Or, if this is too far afield, what of Schorske's *Fin-de-siècle Vienna* (1980)? Its first chapter is titled "Politics and Psyche: Schnitzler and Hofmannsthal."⁸⁷ Or James H. Billington's *Icon and the Axe* (1966)?⁸⁸ Or Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (1958)?⁸⁹ Do these belong to the period when intellectual historians expelled literature? To Harlan, probably none of these count, since they may be too flatfooted in their employment of literature. Harlan is not really bothered by absence of literature from history, however; he is irked by the absence of a different beast: literary theory.

This sleight-of-hand or confusion facilitates the stance that Harlan shares with

⁸³ Cohen, *Historical Culture*, 113. To be sure, this sentence includes references to the relevant pages in Barthes and Derrida, for instance, "(see Barthes 1970: 145)." Unfortunately, nothing resembling "performative" appears on p. 145 of the cited work. Barthes, "Historical Discourse," in *Introduction to Structuralism*, Michael Lane, ed. (New York, 1970).

⁸⁴ Cohen, *Historical Culture*, 325.

⁸⁵ "For a provocative discussion of literature's return specifically to history," Harlan refers the reader to Linda Orr, "The Revenge of Literature: A History of History," *New Literary History*, 18 (Autumn 1986): 1–22. Yet this piece contains only the most marginal and fleeting references to historians. Harlan, "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature," 581 n. 1.

⁸⁶ Robert Allen Skotheim, *American Intellectual Histories and Historians* (Princeton, N.J., 1966), 145–48.

⁸⁷ Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York, 1981).

⁸⁸ James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York, 1966, 1970).

⁸⁹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (Garden City, N.Y., 1958, 1960).

other new intellectual historians; he also sees himself as besieged, combating a serious and well-armed enemy. He calls the opposition (the "contextualists"), a powerful force, "the dominant and now conventional orthodoxy . . . well placed, well organized and increasingly intolerant of alternative approaches." He offers as evidence John P. Diggins' book on Thorstein Veblen, *The Bard of Savagery*. Diggins' effort to "recontextualize" and "rewrite" Veblen received a critical review and comment in several historical journals, meaning "the American historical establishment would have none of it."⁹⁰

Harlan also alludes to one of the odder pieces by LaCapra, "On Grubbing in My Personal Archives." Although LaCapra also challenges contextual reductionism, he made an exception. LaCapra found highly significant that his own book *"Madame Bovary" on Trial*, which he characterizes as a book by "a full professor at a 'major research institution,'" was sharply criticized in the "official publication of the American Historical Association" by an assistant professor from the bush leagues. Moreover, after a reply from LaCapra, James Smith Allen of Phillips University in Enid, Oklahoma, did not back down.⁹¹ LaCapra took umbrage.

I would suggest that the very fact that a relatively unknown assistant professor from a relatively unknown university is willing not only to write a critical review but to follow it up with a rather imperious letter [a reply to LaCapra's response] indicates that he must be fairly certain he is indeed invoking conventional wisdom and will have the large majority of the profession in his corner . . . [T]he hegemonic voice of historiography . . . speaks through him [the reviewer].⁹²

In Allan Megill's essay, there is less posturing, yet he, too, vaguely refers to an army of historians stamping out new theories. Opponents are everywhere, but he hardly finds any. His examples of historical writings also seem askew: only one comes from a historian, another he invents, still others derive from textbooks. He shares with Harlan an ostentatious appeal to sophisticated paradigms, hinting that common historians will be unable to follow his subtlety. "The force and implications of this essay's distinction between recounting and explanation," Megill notes toward his conclusion, "are likely to be misunderstood by many readers." Or he states, "Yet, even among historians of some sophistication, there remains a tendency to underrate the force and scope of the hermeneutical insight that all perception is perspectival."⁹³

What are the issues? The idioms of Harlan and Megill diverge from one

⁹⁰ Harlan, "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature," 594, 607. For some reflections on Harlan's essay, see Joyce Appleby, "One Good Turn Deserves Another: Moving beyond the Linguistic," *AHR*, 94 (December 1989): 1326-32.

⁹¹ See *AHR*, 88 (June 1983): 805-07. Allen is author of numerous essays on nineteenth-century French reading and publishing, and two books: *Popular French Romanticism: Authors, Readers and Books in the 19th Century* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1981); *In the Public Eye: A History of Reading in Modern France, 1800-1940* (Princeton, N.J., 1991).

⁹² LaCapra, "On Grubbing in My Personal Archives," 49.

⁹³ Megill, "Recounting the Past," 646, 636. Megill likes formulations suggesting that even the most sophisticated fall behind Megill. In its pedantic one-upmanship, the following satirizes itself: "Even historians aware of the hermeneutic tradition often resist the self-reflexive implications. Note, for example, Quentin Skinner's apparently unwitting reduction of post- to pre-Heideggerian hermeneutics"; p. 637 n. 38. Since text is the name of the game, it is tempting to begin at the beginning of his text. Megill thanks four research assistants for their help and thirty colleagues for their comments. For an essay, this is an act of intimidation.

another—in fact, they are almost opposite—but their general efforts run parallel. Like LaCapra and White, they resist what they consider scientific approaches to history and texts, and they appeal to new literary theories. Harlan argues against both the “radical contextualists” and those who seek “to recover authorial intention.” Postmodern literary theory subverts these reductionist methods. “Texts do not point backward, to the historical context or putative intentions of their now-dead authors; they point forward, to the hidden possibilities of the present.”⁹⁴

Harlan becomes a bit misty-eyed and mystifying; he writes about the need to recognize that “every text, at the very moment of its inception, has already been cast onto the waters, that no text can ever hope to rejoin its father, that it is the fate of every text to take up the wanderings of a prodigal son that does not return.”⁹⁵ Megill is more sober. He challenges “professional orthodoxy” that elevates causal explanation over more subjective interpretations or descriptions.⁹⁶ For two reasons, historians still denigrate descriptions and esteem scientific approaches and explanations: their “prejudice for universality” and their “hermeneutic naïveté, or the belief in immaculate perception.” Both are derived from the continuing prestige of “science,” especially the belief that science requires a neutral observer seeking general laws. “It is widely held in philosophy and in social science that only knowledge of the general or universal (as distinguished from the local or particular) is truly scientific.”⁹⁷

Turning first to *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World*, Megill challenges conventional opinion by avowing that Braudel’s masterpiece is “narrative history.” This truth has been missed because of a traditionalism that identifies narrative as a chronicle or sequence of actions; yet narrative is much more, combining four elements: action, happening, character, and setting. The first two are “events,” which means they “occur”; the latter two are “existents,” which means they

⁹⁴ Harlan, “Intellectual History and the Return of Literature,” 604. See the criticism of Harlan following his article: David A. Hollinger, “The Return of the Prodigal,” *AHR*, 94 (June 1989): 610–21.

⁹⁵ Harlan, “Intellectual History and the Return of Literature,” 600.

⁹⁶ Megill, “Recounting the Past,” 631.

⁹⁷ Megill, “Recounting the Past,” 632, 634. Megill’s essay may be bidding not simply for a shift toward a hermeneutical history but for itself as a notable effort on that behalf; rhetorically, it almost offers itself as a rejoinder to Carl G. Hempel’s 1942 “Function of General Laws in History” (which Megill cites), which was required reading for a positivist philosophy of history. Hempel sought to push history toward the exact sciences by promoting a search for general laws. His essay began: “It is a rather widely held opinion that history . . . is concerned with the description of particular events of the past rather than with the search for general laws.” Hempel considered this “unacceptable” and tried to show why. Hempel, “The Function of General Laws in History,” in Patrick L. Gardiner, ed., *Theories of History* (Glencoe, Ill., 1959), 344–45. Forty-five years later, Megill begins almost identically but argues the reverse proposition: “It is a rather widely held opinion among professional historians that the truly serious task of historiography . . . is the task of explanation,” that is, causal and general laws. It is difficult to figure out why Megill imagines that in the decades since Hempel’s essay the positivist currents have become stronger; Hempel and others who advanced similar arguments did not make much impact, and surely their influence has diminished, not increased, since the 1940s. “When Carl Hempel applied Karl Popper’s concept of a ‘covering law’ to history,” James T. Kloppenberg has written, “and when Mandelbaum elaborated his own objectivist theory, few historians were persuaded.” Kloppenberg, “Objectivity and Historicism: A Century of American Historical Writing,” *AHR*, 94 (October 1989): 1022.

“simply are.” “Emphasis on one of the four elements limits the attention given to the others.” To clarify, Megill offers a formula:

$$(AH) \times (CS) = k$$

which means “action times happening [that is, ‘events’] times character times setting [that is, ‘existents’] equals a constant.” Unfortunately, what these elements are, and why they must stand in an inverse relation, remains obscure; we are assured, however, that only traditionalists or the “uninformed” will deny the truth of this formula.⁹⁸ With this formula, we see that Braudel’s book is narrative history.

The same irony that marks the work of White and LaCapra is evident here. The new intellectual historians resolutely seek to escape from a baneful positivism that erases the specificity of history; they reject a search for general, causal, and objective laws; they want to attend fully to the ambiguities of the text and the subjectivity of the historians who interpret the texts. These laudable aims, however, vaporize in the course of their contributions. Instead of reviving historical thinking and nurturing subjectivity, they promote empty taxonomies and scientific idioms. They celebrate bold theories and revel in cautious truisms. They cherish a more literary history and offer pale methodologies and systems.

New history, new social history, new intellectual history: especially in history, “new” is suspect. But that does not mean nothing changes or should not change. By their energy and thoughtfulness, the new intellectual historians have brought a welcome ferment to a quiet field; and the story is far from over. An initial report suggests, however, that they succumb to bloodless scholasticism and cold formalism.

⁹⁸ Megill, “Recounting the Past,” 645.