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Michael Dorsch, *French Sculpture following the Franco-Prussian War, 1870-80. Realist Allegories and the Commemoration of Defeat*. Farnham and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2010. 206 pp. Illustrations. \$109.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4094-0352-4.

Response by Michael Dorsch, The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art.

Neil McWilliam's review of my recent book on French commemorative sculpture created in the years immediately following the Franco-Prussian War raises many issues. Unfortunately, the most interesting issue McWilliam raises pertains not to the content of the book, but rather, to his limited notion of historiography. Positivism runs deep in McWilliam's conception of history, or, in this case, art history. When creative, a critical writing tells a good story well, yet the same events can certainly be told differently, and, in all likelihood, equally well. There is no such thing as an absolutely correct account of history; it is fiction in one way or another. One can err, surely, in presenting basic data, but interpreting this data is a creative act.

The conceptual underpinnings of McWilliam's view of history manifest themselves most clearly in the final paragraph of his review where he finds fault with building a narrative on the basis of four works of art, four case studies which are, he claims, "...isolated from the visual confusion and thematic interference that a more inclusive examination of... [the period] might reasonably involve." Yet, all kinds of things happen at the same time. Any moment in history is full of paradoxes. It is perfectly legitimate to build a narrative on selected works and to illuminate one possible reading among many based on these works. If a historian attempts a complete reconstruction of a given historical moment in every detail, it can only read like a legal brief. Such historical writing may have its place in providing a packrat-like storage of data, but the irony is that even the most assiduously comprehensive history is inevitably a fiction of one sort or another.

McWilliam's thoughts on my book do not truly comprise a review of my work. Rather, he has written a compendium of amplifications and corrigenda, as if a book written in any manner other than his own is by nature deficient or even wrong. With his relentlessly dogmatic denunciations, he leaves no room for any perspective but his own. How unfortunate. In a relatively new field of study, one with plenty of room to support the research of any number of scholars, McWilliam's negativity closes the book on further discussion. Perhaps the most relevant issue to arise from McWilliam's "review" has nothing to do with nineteenth-century French sculpture, realist commemorations of defeat, or any other matter raised in my book. Instead, it begs the question of the standards of civility and professionalism that critics must be expected to use in responding to novel ideas that might, heaven forbid, differ from their own.

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