

THE CULT OF CLIO: A RHETORICIAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE ARTS AND ANTICS OF HISTORIANS

Douglas Lawrie
University of Western Cape

Abstract

This article looks at the art of the historian from a rhetorical perspective. After distinguishing between two senses history, it looks at the commonplace in the debate on history and at four basic attitudes towards history. It goes on to suggest (using examples from the work of Carl Becker and RG Collingwood) that, in spite of major disagreements among historians, there has been, for about a century, a reasonably stable common ground in the debate. It is, for instance, generally accepted that historical accounts do not deal with stable facts, but are incomplete, imaginative narratives. Nevertheless, it remains useful to distinguish between story and history. The intertwining of fact and fiction is illustrated at the hand of an example from the work of Nathalie Zemon Davis. Finally, the question of bias in historiography is addressed and it is suggested that subjective factors need not stand in the way of a type of objectivity if the latter is considered as a virtue related to a practice.

Keywords: Historiography, Rhetoric, Narrative, Collingwood, Objectivity

Rhetorical Criticism and History

If, as a minimal definition has it, rhetoric is situated discourse, rhetorical criticism cannot ignore the rhetorical situations of the rhetorical acts it studies. Although reconstructing the rhetorical situation does not always involve the critic in historical questions in the strict sense, those critics who deal with ancient texts should be on their guard lest their “synchronic” approach issues in historical judgments by default (particularly the tacit judgment that a particular text is “timeless”).

Since rhetorical critics are seldom trained historians, they generally they have to “buy in” historical expertise – no easy task, given the range of divergent views among historians. Thus rhetorical critics, though they need not become primary producers of historical accounts, should at least strive to be informed consumers of such accounts. In a series of three articles (of which this is the first), I shall attempt to consider the art of historians from a rhetorical perspective. My intention is not to provide a primer in historiography, but to examine some aspects of the rhetoric of historians, paying particular attention to common opinions, typical disputes and paradigmatic arguments among historians.

The intimate link between historiography and rhetoric has long been recognized. When Hexter spoke of the rhetoric of history in 1968 (see Dillon 1991:114-118), his view was not essentially new, though he shocked some positivist historians. A few years later, two historians, Hayden White and Peter Gay, representing rather different views and without referring to each other, examined the rhetoric of some earlier historians in their books (White 1973; Gay 1974). Both, in their different ways, provided fine examples of practical rhetorical criticism. Perhaps, then, a rhetorician who attempts to read the rhetoric of the discourse *on* historiography is not simply presumptuous.

The Two Meanings of 'History'

It is a commonplace that the word "history" is used in two distinct senses. It refers to "what happened or was in the past" (also the recent past we tend to call the present) and also to our accounts, study or perceptions of the past.¹ At an elementary level the distinction is clear and simple: history is (a) the past, and (b) the account we give (to ourselves or to others) of the past. Nevertheless, both definitions are highly problematic.

History in the first sense embraces a massive totality of things, persons, actions, events and relationships, seen as an interlocking whole. In this sense History (often written with a capital letter) may be seen as the horizon of "absolutely everything", just as, from different perspectives, "language", "society" or "matter" is such an ultimate horizon. Whatever is historical simply by virtue of being, and all understanding, if it is to be understanding at all, is historical understanding (cf Margolis 1995:5ff; Veyne quoted in Tohaneanu 2000:175). The problem is that we may *imagine* such totalizing frameworks but can never study or *understand* them. If History is "everything", it is no longer differentiated by anything else and we cannot get it into our sights. What we can study is always "historical"; it is never History.

History in the second sense always refers to something *in the present*: an account we give, a study we undertake, a perception we have. In this sense history (small letter) is always *fragmentary and limited*, because no account, study or perception embraces everything. Here too the imagination necessarily plays a role. History (capital letter) is imagined as an interlocking whole; therefore history (small letter) makes sense of the past by relating various parts to one another. But the relationships themselves are never "present" in the fragments we have; we have to construct them imaginatively.

If so, how can we distinguish between historical accounts and other accounts, between making sense of the past and making sense *sans phrase*? One could say that an account is historical if it represents the past accurately, but there is no way to confirm this. The past is (by definition) absent; we cannot compare it to an account of it (Ankersmit 1998b:212). One could also call an account historical if it accords with the evidence (currently present) we have of the past. This does not really improve matters, because it soon turns out that what we call an item of "evidence" is either itself an account or something we read as an account; in short, it is a *representation* of the past.²

I shall not discuss these problems further here. For the time being, I shall accept the simple distinction at face value and say that this article deals with history as "historical accounts" or *historiography*. Clio, the Muse of History, was seen as the one who inspired historiographers. What sort of inspiration does she offer to those who serve her?

The Commonplaces of Historiography

In rhetorical theory the commonplaces (or topics) of a debate show what the main areas of consensus or contestation are and thus what is at stake in the debate. When a saying or point of view gains the status of a commonplace, it is not necessarily generally accepted but has at least gained wide currency. It is likely to be cited (directly or indirectly) by those who presuppose its truth and by those who deliberately seek to oppose it. The commonplaces offered (with some comments) in this section indicate what people (not only historians) often say about history and historiography. Most of them are from collections of

¹ Frykenberg (1996:19-37) discusses the distinction at length. See also Oakeshott 1983:1f; Halpern 1988:6.

² Ankersmit (2000:155-158) gives a good account of "the priority of the representation over the represented" in which we have the represented *only* through the representation.

quotations and are given without references. On the one hand such loose sayings seldom adequately represent the views of their authors; on the other hand they represent views that are frequently voiced in different forms by different people.

Historical study is thought to serve the present or the future:

- *Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat (fulfil, relive) it* (Santayana). Perhaps, but better is: *He who limits himself to the present will not understand the present* (Michelet 1973:9).
- *Study the past, if you would divine the future* (Confucius).

Others disagree:

- *What ... history teaches is this: that people and governments have never learned anything from history* (Hegel, who thought this a mistake; similarly Aldous Huxley).
- *History justifies whatever we want it to. It teaches absolutely nothing, for it contains everything and gives examples of everything* (Valery). Thus: *You can never plan the future by the past* (Edmund Burke).

But it is not easy to escape from history:

- *We all live in the past, because there is nothing else to live in* (Chesterton).
- *The past is not dead; it is not even past* (I have not trace the author; similarly Proust).

This view is more or less compulsory if one takes a strongly “scientific” view of history:

- *The present is the past* (Marc Bloch).

Freud would have agreed. And yet the past is often seen as irretrievable:

- *The past is another country; they do things differently there* (LP Hartley).

History is often seen as an account of (mainly) human ills and mistakes:

- *Indeed, history is nothing more than a tableau of crimes and misfortunes* (Voltaire).

It used to be thought that historiography stood or fell with disinterested accuracy:

- *Wie es eigentlich gewesen* (Ranke).

This (sometimes with “wirklich” for “eigentlich”) has become a bugbear commonplace.³

- *Disinterested intellectual curiosity is the life-blood of real civilization. Social history provides one of its best forms* (Trevelyan 1949:xii, who goes on to say: *At bottom ... the appeal of history is imaginative*).
- *It requires an impartial man to make a good historian* (Lord Acton, who goes on to say that it needs partiality to unearth the evidence).

³ It is taken to be the epitome of historical positivism. But “Ranke was not a Rankean” (Burke 1991:3), and the quotation, taken out of context, is misleading – Ranke did not believe that this goal could ever be reached (Bentley 1999:39). The dictum aptly describes the *question* to which historical enquiry responds (not the *result* of the enquiry). In this sense it is openly endorsed by historians who explicitly reject positivism (Huizenga 1950:31; Gay 1974:119f; Himmelfarb 1994:134; Hexter 1998:61) and tacitly endorsed by others (Ankersmit 2000:161; LaCapra 1998:104; Norman 1998:168). It is instructive to examine the practice of a member of the *Annales* School, sworn enemies of Ranke and his school. In writing about the battle of Bouvines, Georges Duby (1973) first says (paraphrasing Braudel) that “events are like the foam of history”. Events leave traces and these traces bestow existence on them (1f). Next he says that that “positivists” have reconstructed the events of the battle (and the causes) as best they could – he can add nothing to their contributions, which “should not be underestimated” (4f). Then he argues that there are reasons why such reconstructions of singular events are never very reliable (5). His own approach is that of the anthropologist: he strives to wish to see the event and its effects as “wrapped up in a cultural whole” (6). The conclusions he reaches (57-137 *passim*) is *formally* an account of “wie es eigentlich gewesen”, though he focuses on social and cultural trends rather than on singular events. Thus he disagrees with Ranke about the “es”, not the “eigentlich”.

The more common view today is that history is always both biased and unreliable:

- *The past is as much a product of the imagination as the future* (Nietzsche, I believe, but I have not been able to trace the reference).
- *The very ink with which history is written is merely fluid prejudice* (Twain).

A corollary of this is that “standard” historiography reflects the views of the rulers:

- *The victors get to write the history* (anonymous).

But only if one forgets much, from Thucydides to national historiography! The link between the past and the future becomes a sinister one if the past can be manipulated:

- *He who controls the past controls the future* (Orwell).

Are natural events historical or is history a category that pertains only to human beings?

An extreme view:

- *There is no history; only biography* (Emerson; similarly Carlyle).

But the position is also typical of Marxist thought:

- *History is what happens to an animal so constituted as to be able, within limits, to determine its own determinations* (Eagleton 2000:97).

Not quite a commonplace, but a neat formulation of a common view. The opposite impulse can also call Marx as witness: see the apparently deterministic statements in the preface to the first edition of *Das Kapital* (Marx 1976:88-93).⁴ The discrepancy demonstrates the limitations of commonplaces. They are sharply formulated statements, often made in the hurly-burly of debate; being brief, pungent and highly oppositional, they are invariably overstatements. As a result, one person may, in different contexts, rely on opposing commonplaces.

Four Attitudes towards History

At a “higher” level one can talk of four basic attitudes towards the study and writing of history. These attitudes are not yet “theories of history” but indicate *tendencies* that manifest themselves when different people study or write history.

- *The empirical or descriptive attitude*

Both terms are misleading, since all historians sometimes use empirical methods and those with this attitude do not always restrict themselves to description. The attitude is perhaps best expressed in a programmatic sentence: Let’s do the work first and worry about the theory later. It is an empirical attitude in the special sense that theory (if any) is supposed to arise from experimental practice. This does not imply that empirical historiographers start without any theory or never set out specifically to test a theory. It does mean that initial theories are piecemeal or *ad hoc*; they are not theories “of history” but about something in history. This attitude has been particularly influential in British (and some American) historiography.

⁴ On the basis of such statements Popper (1961:vii and *passim*) places Marx among what he calls historicists (historical determinists). But Kolakowski – hardly a sympathetic witness – gives a more balanced view, correctly noting that isolated statements that seem to imply historical determinism should not be taken literally (1978:338-346; 363-365).

▪ *The historicist or scientific attitude*

Again the terms are deceptive, because historicism can be confused with historism (see below)⁵ and because non-historicists do not necessarily exclude the use of scientific methods. The mark of this attitude is the attempt to apply to and extract from the study of history general laws, principles or structures. In one form it simply historical determinism, stating that all events in history are caused by the interaction of general laws with specific circumstances.⁶ The laws (or, in a weaker form, tendencies) are not necessarily laws “of history”; they may, indeed, be laws of society, of human nature, or the like. In another (structuralist) form it uses scientific (often quantitative) methods to determine the broad *structures* of which particular events (and persons) are “instances” or “mutations”.⁷ This attitude is found among “scientific” Marxists” and has historically been influential in France (via Durkheim and Comte).

▪ *The historian attitude*

Basic to this attitude is the conviction that meaning can be found in the individual and the contingent (not only in general laws and principles). In dealing with natural phenomena and processes, we “know” by categorizing and examining cause and effect. In human history, historicists argue, we deal with the radically unique; therefore to know is not to explain (which is to reduce to something else) but to understand (*Verstehen*). This requires empathy (*Einfühlung*) or intuition.⁸ Historicists insist on the uniqueness of each historical entity, but sometimes (especially in German historism) add that the individual and unique datum has an identity that binds it to a collective and a “destiny”. For instance, the individual person may share in a national identity and destiny. The historian attitude was particularly influential in Germany.⁹

▪ *The attitude of historicity or the postmodern attitude*

If the historian attitude is carried to its logical conclusion, one has to say that events in history are in no demonstrable way connected to one another.¹⁰ Moreover, if we apply historism consistently to the historiographer, the implication is that the historian is caught within his or her (unique) historical situation and simply imposes this present on a fictioned past. If we ourselves are radically historical beings, we cannot step outside our time to study another time.¹¹

⁵ On the distinction between historism and historicism, see Frykenburg 1996:5f; Bentley 1999:22; White 1999:185n4. Popper used the term historicism in English, but Historismus (historism) in German, thus causing considerable confusion. In his exposition of historicism (1960:5-34) he actually confuses the two attitudes himself.

⁶ “In regard to nature, events apparently the most irregular and capricious have been explained, and have been shown to be in accordance with fixed and universal laws. ...[I]f human events were subjected to similar treatment, we have every reason to expect similar results” (Buckle, quoted in Lukacs 1985:293).

⁷ The scientific bias of the *Annales* School is well represented by Le Roy Ladurie (cf 1979:6, 15, 20, 114 and *passim*).

⁸ On the role of Dilthey, Windelband and Rickert in the crystallization of these views, see Iggers 1965:297-301; Bentley 1999:87-90.

⁹ Georg Iggers has provided both an excellent summary (Iggers 1965) and a detailed treatment (Iggers 1983) of German historism. But historism does not always conform to the German model.

¹⁰ This is already implicit in Ranke’s statement that each epoch (and person) is “immediate to God” (cf Iggers 1965:292).

¹¹ “I am the prisoner of my own Self and of my environment... A being who has neither the same past nor the same passions, who does not write in the same time and place, will not use the same data similarly” (Duby,

This argument, influenced by Heidegger and Nietzsche,¹² leads to the postmodern view of historiography, which, in its extreme form, runs as follows: The study of history is a study of *representations* of the past. We do not study the representations (historical accounts) to determine their accuracy, since we cannot compare the representation to the represented (the past). We can only determine *how* the past was represented in each case by comparing various representations (see Ankersmitt 2000:156) what literary techniques were used, what ideologies operated, what selections were made and what type of order was imposed. Historical study is a specific type of *textual* study.¹³

The neatness of a set of categories is always deceptive; few historians absolutely exemplify one attitude in their practice. Though Marxist historians are probably closest to Marx if they remain dialectically poised between historicism and historicism, they have not invariably chosen his course. Christians should probably not be thorough historical determinists, but some (Guizot) have gone far in that direction. Postmodern historians often make confident statements about the past (cf Haskell 1998:312) and empiricists long took at least a general law of progress for granted. Although I have linked historicism to scientific historiography, some forms of historicism have been highly speculative (Spengler, perhaps Toynbee) and would be scorned by those (including some empiricists) who insist on scientific method. Often “father figures” influence historiography even among those who have loudly disowned these fathers (Hegel and Herder in Germany; Comte and Durkheim in France; Hume and Gibbon in England).

These attitudes should not be confused with broad epistemological positions or specific methods, although there is sometimes a loose correlation. The attitudes are best seen in their simplest forms as ultimate *beliefs* (remembering that people generally hold their ultimate beliefs fitfully):

Historicism is the belief that all of history is governed by laws that not essentially different from natural laws, so that *in principle* we should be able to study history as we study physics, *even though we may, at a given stage, know only 1% of these laws.*

Historism is the belief that history is not ultimately determined by natural laws, so that *in principle* a special approach, different from that of the natural sciences, is needed in the study of history, *even though historical phenomena may for 99% be naturally determined.*¹⁴

The postmodernism belief can be stated in a weak or a strong form:

- a) In the weak form, it is the belief that the relationship between any historical account and the past to which it purports to refer is *ultimately undecidable.*

quoted in Tohaneanu 2000:176). But this has little or no influence on his practice (see note 3 above) and is not an impregnable philosophical position – Margolis (1995:236) argues that solipsism is philosophically incoherent.

¹² Heidegger's (early) view on *Geschichtlichkeit*, see Heidegger 1935:372-397 and the exposition in Carr 1991:106-116 (about which I have doubts). Since Nietzsche views on history (not fully represented in *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Gegenwart*) are either impenetrable or confused, one may as well read “Nietzsche”, that is, Foucault (1984) on Nietzsche.

¹³ Both Gertrude Himmelfarb (1994) and Keith Windschuttle (1997) have launched spirited but somewhat overstated attacks on postmodern historiographers. Far more balanced is the view of Russell Jacoby (1999): compare his treatment of Hayden White (1999:95-101) with that of Windshuttle (1997:232-241).

¹⁴ Thus many historians who are decided not historians according to the German model adopt a form of historicism to avoid determinism on the one hand and relativism on the other (cf Levi 1991:94f). While insisting that people are able to make significant choices (Sharp 1991:37) and to engage in “self-creating acts” (Scott 1991:65n40), they do not claim that people are fully autonomous and fully rational beings (Scott 1991:58).

- b) In the strong form, it is the belief that language is *opaque*, that language refers *only* to itself and is not a mirror of or window to the past or anything else outside language.¹⁵

The belief in its weak form is nothing new and has been held by many historians before postmodernism was heard of (cf Himmelfarb 1994:134f); the belief in its strong form departs so radically from our perception of what happens when we use language that its adherents never succeed in writing as much as one page without tacitly departing from what they purport to believe.¹⁶

Empiricism is the belief that one can or even should write history without finally settling the questions raised by the other beliefs. Empiricists may consider these questions to be either trivial or undecidable, but some may roughly subscribe to one of the other beliefs without wishing to defend it theoretically. This belief is currently in disrepute, the consensus being that it is at best naïve and at worst dishonest.¹⁷ I shall therefore enter a restricted defence in its behalf.

We certainly do not read, interpret or study without *any* prior constructions that may be called “theoretical”. We have, however, no warrant to assume a) that our “theories” are coherent, explicit wholes (as opposed to contradictory and largely subconscious fragments), b) that those theoretical constructs of which we are generally most aware are the ones that play the largest role in a particular interpretation, and c) that our theoretical constructs are the necessary and sufficient causes of our interpretations *in toto*.¹⁸ Moreover, we have excellent reason to believe that our practice can be and often is much better (or much worse) than our (explicit) theories. While empiricism (in my sense) is often taken to be a mark of arrogance, it may equally well be construed as a mark of modesty.

¹⁵ This view, typical of Paul de Man and his school, is also sometimes found among historians (cf Fay 1998:3). Berkhofer (1989:193f) argues that the referent of the word “history” is not the past “because that is absent by definition”; it has to be “the intertextuality that results from the reading of a set of sources combined with the reading of other historians of these same or other sources as synthesized in their exposition”. “What is presented as (f)actuality is a special coding of the historians’ expository texts, designed to conceal their highly constructed nature”. Munz (quoted in Bentley 1999:143) says, “We cannot glimpse at history. We can only compare one book with another book.”

¹⁶ Bernard Shaw proposed a useful test: to see what people believe, do not look at their creeds but at the presuppositions on which they habitually act. Or, as Hexter (1998:60f) puts it: “Men’s actual commitments are much more accurately revealed by what they do in the practice of their calling than by their quasi-philosophical excursions into methodology.” Nancy Partner (1998:74) baldly states that nobody believes the “black-hole epistemology” that leaves us “sealed in a linguistic house of mirrors”, because we are unwilling (and unable) to accept the consequences. This leaves extreme postmodernists with a choice of evils: Either: “Steiner’s choice is for Nietzsche, and I think that he is right. Not because he is ‘really right’ of course, but because such a ‘cultural’ choice appeals to me as well; this is the ungrounded choice (the aporetic ‘madness of the decision’ choice) that I have decided to make here so as to try and ‘make sense’ of other things (Jenkins 1999:6). Or: “for it is possible to live reflexively ... knowing all our meanings are ultimately arbitrary impositions (catachretic). And it is the covering up of this *fact* ... that postmodernism exposes (Jenkins 1999:159, my emphasis). Surely it is a Freudian slip when Jenkins calls the postmodern consciousness “creative, playful and *enervating*” (1999:195, my emphasis).

¹⁷ Bentley (1999:3) says empiricism, “in so far as it involves a lack of theoretical assumptions ... is impossible in practice and unthinkable in theory”. White (1999:viii) says, “To think that one can think outside and without theory is a delusion”.

¹⁸ On the role of non-theoretical “intrusions” in the genesis of two seminal works of history, see Huizenga 1950: 38f and McNeill 1976:1-5.

Historiographic Discourse: Two Representative Positions

Although rhetoricians need a sharp eye for subtle differences among various views, they have to be equally alert to hidden overlaps and correspondences. David Hume (1939: 757n13) noted long ago that disputes are frequently verbal and turn on points of emphasis and degree, not on issues that “admit ... of precise determination.”¹⁹ If we eliminate such disputes and some extreme positions, we find that most historians move in a field in which the battles, heated as they are, *may be* fought according to shared rules.²⁰

Extreme positions – as opposed to extreme posturing – are not common. Are there naïve positivists who believe that our access to the past is direct and unproblematic? Many do indeed toy with forms of relativism and constructivism, but this does not often lead to radical conclusions. Indeed, consistent constructivism seems to lead to Margolis's constructivist realism,²¹ which allows for “real knowledge of the real world” (Margolis 2000:203; cf 1998:45f). Some forms of relativism are self-defeating (Margolis 2000:213), but exponents of them are rare.²²

That our access to the past is through texts may be granted, provided one eschews an extreme form of structuralism (which amounts to linguistic positivism). On the latter view, any distinctive historiographic *parole* has to be based on a distinctive *langue* (as a subset of *langue* in general) that sets the rules for such *parole*. One is then likely to discover that “by its very structure and without there being any need to appeal to the substance and the content, historical discourse is essentially an ideological elaboration or, to be more specific, an *imaginary* elaboration” (Barthes 1986:138). Historical discourse pretends to address the “real” by eliding the signified (interpreted meaning) and merging it with the referent

¹⁹ An example: Rockmore (2000:193) argues that no (historical) interpretation can be (uniquely) true, though some such interpretations are manifestly false and some are more plausible than others. He calls this view relativism. Huizenga (1950:207) says precisely the same, but denies that it amounts to relativism. A closer look reveals that what Huizenga means by relativism is what Rockmore (2000:195ff) calls historical scepticism – which he rejects. Garcia (2000:43) notes how difficult it is to define relativism, defines it for his purpose (50), and after discussion concludes that not all interpretations of texts are relativistic and that not all relativistic interpretations are relativistic in the same way (59f). Rockmore (2000:193) allows the first point (for “special cases, which are probably very rare”) and would probably not contest the second.

²⁰ Without wishing to gloss over differences of opinion, I argue that different theoretical roads sometimes led to one Rome – perceived rather differently depending on one's point of entry. Krausz (2000) has – to my mind convincingly and paradigmatically – argued that different ontological (metaphysical) commitments do not always settle issues at a “lower” level. But remarkable differences among those who are supposedly in agreement also delight the rhetorician. Thus Hans Kellner (1989:325) fulminates against the old separation of form and content and the suggestion that style in historical discourse serves merely to enhance the communication of content. (He states that this is Peter Gay's position, thereby showing that the linguistic turn has not rendered its adherents better readers.) That historical writing should be in a readable form is a mere “triviality” to those who wish to show how presentation creates content. But his sometime co-editor F Ankersmit (1998b:220) admits that the postmodern style creates problems: “one often finds in postmodern writing poor and unconvincing arguments, superfluous technicalities, and obscure jargon... The argumentative nucleus and the length of postmodern writings are often inversely proportional to each other.” But, he continues, “in each fat man there is a thin man wanting to get out”. If we strip off the trappings (separate form from content!), postmodernism has much to teach us. He also gives Gay his due (1998a:161).

²¹ Margolis's view implies “that any coherent constructivism must be realist and that any coherent realism must be constructivist” (Krausz 2000:29f; cf Margolis 2000:206, 208 and for the full argument Margolis 1995).

²² I prefer (mainly for historical reasons) to retain “relativism” as a term of disapprobation – even Derrida rejects it. I apply it, however, only to positions a) that are not clearly distinguished from solipsism, b) that posit a solipsism of the group, or c) that generalize relativity to the point where different relationships and difference among relationships are closed to rational discussion (dead level relativism). This would exclude self-styled relativists such as Rockmore and Margolis.

(reality). This “act of authority” produces the “reality effect” – as does (for instance) realistic novels (138f).²³

But this view, which does not accord with our experience of dealing with texts, has also been rejected by most theorists.²⁴ We read different texts with different expectations, that is, we treat texts as *discourses*, imposing on them a perspective that fits them into various slots within the world of human interaction as we perceive it. The perspective we apply is not quite random, but it is not justified by the rules of a (logically or chronologically) prior *langue*. The question is not primarily one of *accuracy* or “correspondence with the facts”, or of how we may check whether there is such a correspondence. I might decide that, say, Allan Bullock’s book on Hitler is in some respects bad (biased, careless, ignorant) historiography only if I grant that it is indeed historiography and has to be judged by the standards of historiography. My judgment is thus based on my identification of the *mode of intentionality* of the particular discourse.

This is nothing new. During the first half of the 20th century, many historians and philosophers of history knew that historiography was neither a simple “recording” of the past, nor an enterprise that allows for absolute certainty. The historiographic perspective was defined by the historian Carl Becker and the philosopher RG Collingwood in ways which are remarkably similar if one considers their divergent points of departure. In the process they mapped out a large area of common ground has been shared and is shared, albeit with different emphases, by many historians, past and present.

▪ *Becker*

In an article entitled *Everyman His Own Historian*, Becker defined history as “the memory of things said and done”, adding “This is a definition that reduces history to its lowest terms, and yet includes everything that is essential to understanding what it really is” (Becker 1967a:922).²⁵ The strength of this otherwise debatable definition is that it places history within the framework of ordinary human interaction. The task of the professional historian is a specialization of something we need to do every day – remembering what was said and done. Memory, in Becker’s use of the term, is not confined to lived experience. Just as forgotten events of one’s own life may be “restored” to memory by consulting sources, so too a more distant past, one beyond living memory, becomes part of “my memory” when research or learning calls it to mind. “Mr Everyman” (in Becker’s terms) is constantly “reenforcing and enriching his immediate perceptions to the end that he may live in a world of semblance more spacious and satisfying than is to be found within the narrow confines of the fleeting moment” (924).

Moreover, memory implies a disciplined interpretative construction. A theory of historical causation is not written into things said and done, but we cannot claim that our

²³ The particular article by Barthes exhibits the mixture of incipient positivism and “emancipatory” posturing found in some forms of structuralism and formalism. Thus he objects to fact that “the narration of past events” has been “placed under the imperious warrant of the ‘real’” (which he believes is simply a reality effect). On the same page he says that the new linguistics of discourses must “decide if structural analysis *permits* retaining the old typology of discourses” and whether it is “*legitimate* still to oppose ... fictive narrative to historical” (1986:127, my emphases). *Voilà* – a new imperious warrant for a new reality vouched for by an impersonal subject. Elsewhere impressionistic generalizations jostle with a (pseudo-)scientific terminology.

²⁴ For criticism, see LaCapra 1983:56f; McCullagh 1998:35ff; White 1999:25f; Margolis 1995:*passim*.

²⁵ For a similar linking of history and memory (“reminiscence”), see Wilder 1990:149-159. Wilder considers casual reminiscence, anecdotes, gossip and news-mongering to lie “at the roots of history and historiography” (150).

acts of interpretation create things done and said *ex nihilo* – even the deliberate falsification of history or the writing of fiction involves memory. Memory is indispensable, yet it is not simply a tool that records:

The extent to which the specious present may thus be enlarged and enriched will depend upon knowledge, *the artificial extension of memory*, the memory of things said and done in the past and in distant places. But not upon knowledge alone; rather upon knowledge directed by *purpose*. The specious present is an unstable pattern of thought, incessantly changing in response to our immediate perceptions and the purposes that arise therefrom. At any given moment each of us weaves into this unstable pattern such actual or artificial memories as may be necessary to orient us in our little world of endeavor. ... Thus from the specious present, which always includes more or less of the past, the future refuses to be excluded; and the more of the past we drag into the specious present, the more an hypothetical, patterned future is likely to crowd into it also. *Which comes first, which is cause and which effect, whether our memories construct a pattern of past events at the behest of our desires and hopes, or whether our desires and hopes spring from a pattern of past events imposed on us by experience and knowledge, I shall not attempt to say.* What I suspect is that memory of past and anticipation of future events work together, go hand in hand as it were in a friendly way, without disputing over priority and leadership. (Becker 1967a:925, my emphases).

▪ *Collingwood*

Collingwood's notion of history would appear to be diametrically opposed to Becker's in that he rejects what he calls the "common-sense theory" that makes history dependent on memory and authority (Collingwood 1956:234ff). For him the very idea of critical historical thought negates the idea of authorities: in critical historical thinking "It is the truthfulness and the information of the so-called authority that are in question; and this question the historian has to answer for himself, on his own authority" (237). If the historical memories represented by the authorities cannot provide the historian with final answers, it follows that history does not depend on memory (238).

But Collingwood is not simply saying that writing history involves an interaction between data (sources) and critical principles. He denies that *anything* is given to the historian. "...in history, just as there are properly speaking no authorities, so there are properly speaking no data" (243). Is a statement by Thucydides a datum for historical thought? No, says Collingwood, it is a result or achievement of historical thought:

It is only our historical knowledge which tells us that these curious marks on paper are Greek letters; that the words which they form have certain meanings in the Attic dialect; that the passage is authentic Thucydides, not an interpolation or corruption; and that on this occasion Thucydides knew what he was talking about and was trying to tell the truth. Apart from all this, the passage is merely a pattern of black marks on white paper: not any historical fact at all, but simply something existing here and now, and perceived by the historian (244).

He concludes that history depends solely on what he calls the *a priori* imagination. This imagination is not only what enables critical selection and the construction of a coherent whole; it is also what constitutes the sources as sources (245). Thus "As works of imagination, the historian's work and the novelist's do not differ" (246). The distinction lies at another level: the historian remains bound to certain standards of truth, standards that involve localization in space and time, internal coherence and relation to evidence (246f). Since, however, neither existing authorities (being open to criticism) nor the products of

historical thought (being products of the imagination) guarantee truth, the locus of this peculiar truth can only be an “innate” idea of the past – “historical knowledge can only grow out of historical knowledge” (247). The criterion of historical truth “is the idea of history itself: the idea of an imaginary picture of the past” (248).

▪ *Comparison*

The gap between Collingwood’s frankly idealistic vision of historical truth and Becker’s essentially empiricist vision of historical relativity is not as great as it would appear.²⁶ On the following points they roughly agree with each other and with many historians before and after them, some of whom are not committed to either empiricism or idealism:

1. Both see historical thinking as a general human activity.²⁷ Neither would allow that the methods and cognitions of the professional historian are in principle different from those by which every person imagines the past as the backdrop of this present, a backdrop that is still, in some sense, present here and now.
2. Both agree that this past is a construction (not a given) and that the constructing involves the imagination (cf Becker 1967a:927; Collingwood 1956:242).²⁸ Neither would, however, concede that this imagination is an entirely free one. Although both draw an analogy between the historian and the creative writer (Becker 1967a:927; Collingwood 1956:242, 245f), both concede that the analogy is a limited one (Becker 1967a:926f, 932; Collingwood 1959:246).
3. The distinction lies at the level of intentionality and cannot be identified by means of formal criteria. For both the construction and the reconstruction of the past formally have the nature of narratives (Becker 1967a:929, 931; Collingwood 1959:241,245). “History tells stories” (Danto, quoted in Mink 1998:123).²⁹

²⁶ Becker was no crudely materialistic empiricist and was clearly influenced by Collingwood in some respects. In a later paper (Becker 1959), he often employs Collingwood’s arguments and terminology: the “complex web” (1959:122), records as marks on paper (126), the role of imagination (127f), the role of choices made by the historian (130), and so forth.

Becker’s earlier papers contemplate the process of creating history with great serenity. The advent of Hitler and Stalin drove him to reconsider his breezy statement that “we have long since learned not to bother with reason and logic” (Becker 1932:25). The relativism that lacks “any semblance of the old authority, the old absolute, ... any stable foothold from which we get a running start” (1932:15) is now perceived as an “anti-intellectual, relativistic trend”: “truth and morality turn out to be relative to the purposes of any egocentric somnambulist who can succeed ... creating the power to impose his unrestrained will upon the world”. “Hitler and Stalin represent an exorbitant price to pay for a little wisdom” (Becker 1967b:156). It had become important to defend reason and morality (157ff). These twists and turns that Becker had to execute are still relevant to the debate on historiography.

²⁷ Collingwood (1956:11f) did believe that ancient people knew no historiography in his sense, because they had not reflected on their knowledge of the past. But he argues that “In a sense we are all historians nowadays” (7).

²⁸ “The past can only be reconstructed by the imagination” (Ricoeur 1984:82). The view is not new. Theodor Mommsen (quoted in Gay 1974:201) spoke of “die Phantasie, welche wie aller Poesie so auch aller Historie Mutter ist”. Nor does it imply a suspension of critical faculties. Higham (quoted in LaCapra 1985:25) says the art of historiography calls for a critical distance and “the penetration of a realm beyond the immediate self and its society”, which “calls for a creative outreach of imagination and draws on all the resources of the historian’s human condition”. Malina (1991:356n16) sneers at the “presumably well-tutored imagination of exegetes who prefer to remain innocent of Mediterranean values and behavior”, but his method involves constructing “more or less adequate and fitting windows on the world of biblical authors and their audiences” (266) – clearly a labour of the historical imagination.

²⁹ Cf Levi 1991:105f; White 1999:3; Ricoeur 1984:*passim*. For criticism of the Annales School’s rejection of the narrative mode in historiography, see Ricoeur 1984:99-111; LaCapra 1985:117f; White 1999:10, 43f.

4. This view of history implies the incompleteness of historical discourse. The construction of narrative inevitably involves selection (Collingwood 1956:235; cf White 1989:34). The narrative gives “a foreshortened and incomplete representation” (Becker 1967a:932; cf Norman 1998:166), for “the infinite process of the past can never be envisaged as a whole” (Collingwood 1956:247). The holistic history of pure theory always lies beyond historical discourse.
5. This, in turn, has two important consequences. In the first place it means that history has always to be retold; we do not simply inherit a history to which we add day by day. “Every new generation must rewrite history in its own way” (Collingwood 1959:248; cf Becker 1967a:932, Gay 1974:212).
6. In the second place historical thinking is not simply thinking in all its forms. No doubt there is a historical dimension in all thought, but Becker and Collingwood are interested in specifically historical discourse. That discourse, being situated in history, is inevitably historical is a perfectly valid point, but involves a different use of the term history.
7. Both of them argue against an absolute distinction between past and present, being aware that what we call the present (as a temporal position we occupy consciously) is always partly a reconstructed past (cf Becker 1967a:924; Collingwood 1956:233). This point is important for two reasons. It eliminates the prejudice (often found among historians; cf Woodward 1966:296ff) that history deals with past “times” as opposed to a broad band we call “the present time”.³⁰ It also cautions us against an entirely spurious idea of the present as that which alone is “real.” We construct our present (and future) quite as imaginatively as others construct the past.
8. The final point concerns the access we have to the past. Here the disagreement seems greatest: whereas the term memory is crucial for Becker, Collingwood denies that history is based on memory. Now Becker’s notion of memory goes beyond lived experience and includes the “social memories” transmitted by (for instance) schooling. But does one “remember” the events of, say, a fable when one remembers the story? Becker’s conception of memory seems to include a hidden criterion of what could possibly have happened. Entailed in reconstructing the past as the past of this present is the regulative idea that all pasts must be commensurate with pasts either recalled from lived experience or already assimilated into memory. In this sense we can talk about “things said and done” only in terms of memory.

What Collingwood rejects is a definition of memory that restricts it to lived experience and a notion of authority that eliminates critical testing – which Becker would reject as well. Collingwood is, however, well aware of the regulative function of experience and the need to see experience as coherent (cf 1956:241f, 246f). He uses the term *a priori* imagination, rather than experience or memory, to stress that what is experienced makes sense only when it has been given a shape – experiences do not speak for themselves. Each imaginative construction has to take its place in what he calls “the web of imaginative construction”, a web “far more solid and powerful than we have hitherto realized” (244), yet one that cannot be pegged down to fixed points (242).

Postmodern readers who cavil at Becker’s empiricist “memory” and Collingwood’s idealist “*a priori* imagination” would doubtless prefer to talk of society as the individual’s extended memory (Becker hints at this – 1967a:931f) or the web of language. Whether or

³⁰ Woodward (1966) denies that there is a distinguishable perspective that forces us to “see” the distant past in a way essentially different from the way in which we see those recent events that we regard as being “present”.

not these fashionable alternatives represent fundamental improvements, the upshot is the same: we deal with constructions that are imaginative without being random, patterned without fully revealing their own laws, neither as solidly real nor as conveniently malleable as we would like them to be. In each case we have to stretch our terms or employ a metaphor to get a grip on the problem.³¹

I suggest that we regard these points as higher order commonplaces, located somewhere between the scrappy commonplaces of section A and the beliefs of section B, and that we accept the area mapped out by them as the broad middle ground in historiographical discourse. In this broad field traditionalist may feel reassured that they have not lost touch with, say, Burkhardt, Mommsen and Huizenga and postmodernist that they are right there with, say, LaCapra, Ankersmit and White.³² Moreover, it provides room for historians, empiricists, postmodernists and even historicists – provided that they hold their beliefs without fanaticism. (Historicists would have to be satisfied with “tendencies” rather than “laws”.) Most of all, rhetorical critics may regard this as a space in which they can move with due modesty but without undue terror, leaving questions that “do not admit of precise determination” (by the means at their disposal) to the experts.

Fact and Fiction

But is a particular story fact or fiction? Sitting down in a restaurant with some friends on a clear postmodern evening, one can dismiss such questions with a shrug and a witticism. But Ms Everywoman, acting as her own historian, frequently finds herself in situations where such casual sophistication would be silly. When she has to settle an outstanding account (Becker’s example) or investigate a murder case (Collingwood’s example), she has to sort the factual from the fictional. Even in the restaurant she may decide that her bank statement, which arrived the previous day, is a story of “things said and done” and not an attempt on the part of some bank clerk to write a tragedy. Her future order will be influenced by this decision about the past.

If what is called historical method concerns the steps one takes to decide what is fact and what is fiction, Ms Everywoman’s procedures are not, as Becker pointed out, in principle different from those used by professional historians. She uses sources and assigns greater or lesser authority to these: she trusts the official bank statement rather than a scribbled note that purports to be from the bank manager. She recognizes an official statement by certain formal features and in cases of doubt she has this historical record authenticated at the bank. She may also compare the statement to her own records of income and expenditure (comparing documents). When she asks herself why her monthly expenditure is suddenly much higher than the average (although she cannot recall any unusual purchase), she is, in a modest way, a scientific historian, relying on statistical evidence.

³¹ In the heat of the debates few stop to consider that “society”, “language” and “text” are as “absent” (inaccessible to examination) as “History” (capital letter). Moreover, these terms are usually used with some metaphorical extension: the texts of historical study are not all written documents. Using “the nature of texts” to explain history is explaining one unknown in terms of another unknown. LaCapra (1983:19) admits that the postmodern notion of text is metaphorical and therefore imperfect.

³² To document the extent to which this is true would require another article. It is sufficient to note that Collingwood’s views (mirrored by his fellow idealist Oakshott 1983) are still treated with (not uncritical) respect by historians of widely different persuasions: a Marxist (Hirst 1985: 43-56), a conservative Catholic (Lukacs 1985:151f), a postmodernist (White 1998:17f). The same basic framework is found can be derived from Huizenga.

If her financial position strikes her as unusual, she is likely to look for causes. She may find that a large sum was paid to honour a cheque that she cannot recall having written (and with no entry on the counterfoil). Having compared dates, she may infer (without having conclusive evidence) that a cheque was stolen from her cheque-book when she left it unattended in her handbag at the office. But if no such causes can be found and if her financial problems become chronic, she may wonder why her colleagues, who earn roughly as much as she does, seem not to have the problem. At this stage she may become a comparative historian, comparing her pattern of expenditure to that of others at the office. Her “study” will reveal something of her social and economic activities and those of her friends – she has become a social and economic historian.

I believe that professional historians and theorists should not lose touch with Ms Everywoman and her daily activities as historian. Doubtless the professional discipline uses more sophisticated tools and frequently imposes stricter checks,³³ but the “method” is not the private property of the discipline or a purely disciplinary ractice, unrelated to other practices. It is precisely the notion of a purely disciplinary practice that leaves historians vulnerable to the postmodern argument that “history” (and the distinction between fact and fiction in this context) is a product of a specific professional practice and would disappear if the practice were to be abolished.

Viewed from another angle, fact and fiction cannot be sharply distinguished. Broadly speaking (and keeping the etymology of “fiction” in mind), all historical accounts, indeed all discourses, are fictional in that they are *made* (constructed) according to the rules that pertain to linguistic constructions. “The” facts are not simply “given” in any discourse; each discourse is a *selection and combination of linguistic items* that represents in a specific way (which is never one-to-one correspondence). One can thus always study a historical account “as fiction”, without thereby denying that the distinction between fact and fiction is valid at another level. When, for instance, one historian refers to *freedom fighters* and another historian refers to the same group as *terrorists*, one clearly sees how selection “fictions” the two accounts. Similarly, different combinations of the same data result in different views on causes and effects.

Nathalie Zemon Davis (1987) follows this line when she studies French “letters of remission” (letters granting royal pardon for crimes)³⁴ from the 15th and 16th century as fictioned (not fictional) narratives (2ff). It is easy to see how the narratives of the crimes (contained in all the letters) were shaped by current literary and legal conventions. For instance, it is often said that the crime was committed when the perpetrator was “in hot anger” or (literally!) “surprised by wine”. The narratives often make use of what biblical scholars call “type scenes”, for instance, “the carnival” or “drinking together in a pub”. Such typical phrases and plots lend the narratives an air of pure fiction. This impression is strengthened when one considers that perpetrators (often barely literate) usually had the

³³ Not always. If Ms Everywoman is the CEO of a company that has had a disastrous year, her search for the causes may be more rigorous than that of professional historians. Unlike historians, who may settle for plausible a explanation (backed by sufficient evidence) that *fits with their ideological interest*, the CEO’s interests do not allow her the luxury of an ideologically satisfying explanation.

³⁴ The letters of remission have the form of a royal pardon, but incorporate the petitions for pardon. The letters present themselves as written by the king, although the king seldom saw them. The royal Chamberlain or his clerks usually read the petitions and passed the ones he approved on to the Parliament of Paris (or another body with similar authority in other regions) for registration. But once the letter of remission was duly registered, it was, legally, a letter carrying the authority of the king. This is of great interest for biblical studies.

help of lawyers when they told their stories. In addition, the royal notaries drafted the actual letters, to be read to and confirmed by the supplicants (15-20).

Did the narratives in any way reflect real events or were they simply imaginative literature? Davis argues the stories are not and could not be pure fiction. The perpetrators were cross-examined on the stories in the letters and were expected to call witnesses or present evidence to back certain claims in them. Moreover, the victims or their families were also able to call witnesses to contest the claims made in the letters. Since unsubstantiated or refutable claims would compromise the supplicant's chances of obtaining a pardon, the various "authors" had to restrain their fictioning imagination (20-25). Davis believes that the letters do substantially reflect the stories of the supplicants and that these stories at least reflect typical features of social life in France at that stage. Studying the letters as "fictions" gives one reason to doubt certain statements in the letters³⁵ but not everything in them.

It seems to me that those who argue about the history and fiction in biblical narratives would benefit greatly from considering the approach employed by Davis. The views defended in some of these debates are not sufficiently nuanced. Some, for instance, have been too quick to draw the conclusion that the presence of "literary" (fictioning) features in a text indicates that the text is fictional in all respects. In the next article I shall deal with some of the implications of narrative form for the study of historical accounts.

Seeing what you want to see

The question of ideology, bias or subjectivity in historical accounts cannot be settled by referring to textual features in isolation. Strictly speaking, texts are texts. *Qua* texts they are neither ideological nor "free" of ideology. The point of view of the narrator, as a feature of the narrative text, signals an ideological *potential*; it is not, as all students of literature know, an index of the ideology of the author. The question of ideology arises when a narrative is read as a discourse. Although some ideological critics have, I believe, underestimated the complexity of the question (which is by no means easy to formulate precisely), the questions about ideological historiography should not be abandoned as irrelevant or simply beyond sensible conjecture.

That neutrality or disinterestedness is *not* a prerequisite or even an asset in the search for historical knowledge is now commonly accepted (Haskell 1998; Lasch-Quinn 1999:32). Our concern with the past is, after all, a concern, a "being interested", in brief, a mode of intentionality. As I have indicated above, a CEO asking why company profits are down would probably wish to know what really happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen!*) *because it is in her interest*. But motivations and interests are not always patent and simple. The CEO might have reasons to ruin the company that outweigh her other interests. And once we invoke an overarching, largely unconscious Ideology that determines our actions "in the last instance", we are clearly in the realm of objects of faith.

Nor does it help much to juggle with the terms subjectivity and objectivity. Historical knowledge can be said to be objective in the strong sense only if one holds an untenable positivistic epistemology. But the term objectivity can be banished as useless only if one takes this same positivistic view as ultimate criterion. In certain contexts the distinction

³⁵ Typically, perpetrators would say that they had struck out "in hot anger" with a dagger and had hit the victim "I know not where". The suggestion that the fatal blow was struck blindly and without intention to kill would be difficult to disprove and is thus a "safe" fiction. Similarly, if the victim survived the immediate attack, it was often said in the letter that she or he died later "for lack of proper medical care or for some other reason", suggesting that the wounds inflicted in the assault were not necessarily fatal.

between subjective and objective views makes good sense and is as informative (and as limited) as all verbal distinctions are.³⁶ When it comes to historical accounts, it is hazardous to equate distortion with subjectivity and accuracy with objectivity. At most one can guess at the role of “objective” (social) and “subjective” (personal) factors.

The extravagantly partisan *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)* (1939) is a grotesque travesty of historiography, but the cause of the problem is probably the objective pressure brought to bear on the anonymous authors rather than their subjectivity. Hilaire Belloc's *Characters of the Reformation* (1937) – equally bad historiography – probably does reflect the author's personal prejudices. But the overtly partisan works of (for instance) EP Thompson and Christopher Hill on the one hand and CV Wedgwood and AL Rowse on the other command the respect of historians – and of intelligent non-specialists. Nor is the distinction purely “technical”: seminal historical works have been written in a very informal style.

I therefore prefer to formulate the question thus: Do we always (inevitably) see in the past what we (consciously or unconsciously) want to see, or can we sometimes see what we definitely do not want to see? As far as I can see (seeing what I want to see!), no answer to this question fully validates itself. My best available account is the following:

We do not *simply* see what we want to see, but we do indeed *in a very complex way* see what we want to see. I conjecture that one might say “We see in the past only what we want to see” in three modes. In the adolescent mode (to which we all revert from time to time) it is said by those who have heard something new, something both shocking and exciting, a glittering piece of knowledge to be displayed with pride – and with a nagging sense of disillusionment. This knowledge, perhaps accepted on good evidence, has not yet been fully assimilated and yields no particular insight. It is, for instance, mainly applied to others and seldom to oneself. In the mode of adulthood it is said with easy cynicism. It is now understood knowledge – both less shocking and less interesting. The statement now reflects “the way of the world”, a way that is not less tawdry for being inevitable. One applies it to oneself and to others indiscriminately.

It is said in the mode of wisdom (only sometimes) by those who, having reaching understanding, kept looking into the past as best they could, not quite sure of what they would find. In the process they learned that “wanting to see” is not a simple matter, that in looking the wanting itself changed and became a want to see more clearly, in better profile. For them this meant seeing what they had wanted to see as outlined, delimited (and thus limited), influenced or otherwise qualified by what they had not wanted to see. Occasionally these qualifications made them want to see quite the opposite from what they had originally wanted to see. At the very least, wanting to see one thing, they had found it impossible to avoid seeing other things. In this mode the statement can be made only with fear and trembling: fear, not that one's fierce want has shoved truth aside, but fear lest one's want has been too weak, too paltry, to push one far enough towards truth.

The terminology of *seeing* is misleading at this level, because the merit of this position does not reside in the purification of a perception. The “better profile” emerges from an openness to entanglements, interactions and relationships; these “others” shape the personal vision and simultaneously make it sharable by others. “My vision” becomes what has been related to other possible visions and can therefore be related persuasively, an account for

³⁶ For instance, regarding a position on the chess-board, the statement “White can mate in four moves” may be objectively true whatever the players involved (subjectively) think. That the notion of objectivity is not tied to positivist “objectivism” is commonly recognized: see Gay 1974:17; LaCapra 1998:94f; Haskell 1998:300; Margolis 2000:219.

which I have become accountable and a response for which I take responsibility.³⁷ The visionary has been transformed into the conversational.

Thus I have and have not given up on something we may as well call objectivity in historiography (and in other matters). The objectivity guaranteed by disciplinary procedures, “method” and the watchful eye of the professional community (formal objectivity) is not quite negligible, but it is always theoretically dubious. Objectivity as a practice linked to a virtue (an acquired disposition of character) is always vulnerable to human weakness, but not to theoretical objections. Nobody claims that it is easy to practice a virtue or that it is possible for a virtuous person to be invariably virtuous in practice. Objectivity in history relates to the formation of the historian, not to the formalities of the discipline.

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³⁷ Thus responsible historians remain “accountable to the facts” *precisely because facts do not “speak for themselves” but belong to human discourse*. This does not entail belief in the immutability or self-evidence of facts: a more adequate (persuasive) account creates new facts. But to ignore what others regard as facts is to brand those others as unworthy of being partners in the conversation. Is it surprising that one of the fiercest attacks on “facts” came from someone who made no secret of his profound contempt for practically everybody?

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