

History and Rhetoric

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An inquiry into the rhetorical aspects of history may seem paradoxical, given that historical discourse is not typically included among those types which, since Aristotle, have been understood to be governed by rhetoric; these types being the deliberative council, the tribunal and the commemorative assembly. It was to these specific audiences that the three kinds of discourse—the deliberative, judiciary, and panegyric—were addressed. However, are the boundaries of the historian's audience sufficiently delineated in order to allow us to identify it as a specific addressee? This first objection, which regards the very legitimacy of the subject of these remarks, can be met by noting a common trait that links history to the above-mentioned three types of discourse; that is, competition between opposed discourses requiring a choice. In each case the aim is to structure a debate that calls for a clear-cut decision. Yet a major problem of the discipline of history is that it allows both for widely varying descriptions of the same series of events, and sanctions the use of a variety of equally acceptable rules or preferences for interpreting a given slice of the past.

This initial remark leads us to the following inquiry: which aspects or elements of rhetoric contribute to the formulation of judgments by the scholarly or general public in regard to works that the historical profession itself considers worthy of being included in the universe of historical discourse?

Here, although they may appear to have little in common, two major accomplishments of rhetoric need to be considered together—accomplishments which, from the time of Ciceron and Quintilien down to the latest chairs of rhetoric, have been part of a unique conceptual constellation. Rhetoric, in the first instance, can be characterized by its preference for a type of *argument* that lies somewhere

between the constraints of the necessary and the arbitrariness of the sophistic, between proof and sophistry. This is the probable argument, the theory of which Aristotle outlined in his *Dialectic*, defining rhetoric as the “antistrophe” or counterpart of dialectic. It is precisely in the three typical situations mentioned above that rhetoric applies the logic of the probable, in the form of the art of persuasion; this latter, like the probable argument itself, oscillates between an art of convincing that appeals to reason, and an art of pleasing, even of seduction, that appeals to the passions of the audience. However, driven by its primary aim of influencing an audience, rhetoric did not limit itself to applying the logic of the probable to a theory of argumentation. It developed a second pole, a theory of figures, of turns of phrase or tropes which, since Ramus and Vico, has been based on four essential tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. This component of rhetoric, which became autonomous, manifests the same qualities of ambiguity and instability whether identified as the seat of linguistic creativity, as is the case according to Vico (and therefore the poetic source of all argumentative discourse), or simply an arsenal of ornaments better suited to please than convince. All the major treatises on rhetoric assume that these two groups—argumentation and tropology—are in reality disjoined members of a relatively unified rhetorical field. Discourse here is defined as an activity leading from *inventio* to *memoria* and *pronunciatio*, and includes *dispositio* and *elocutio*. According to the classic formula, a treatise of argumentation covers the heart of *dispositio*, and a treatise on tropes the heart of *elocutio*. In this way the two *membra disiecta* of rhetoric take their place within a living organism.

In what way does this polarization of rhetoric—pulled in turn between argumentation and tropology, or reconstructed in a chain of operations to form a living whole—concern what some historians have called “historical activity?” (“*l’operation historique*”). It concerns it to the extent that this activity can be described as a progression whose three phases are *documentary research*, *explanation*, and *writing*, this last phase being particularly emphasized in historiographic utterance. If we begin by noting a kinship—at the very least a superficial one—between the rhetoricians’ *inventio* and documentary research, between *dispositio* and the stage of explanation, and finally between *elocutio* and the writing of history, we can then

reasonably inquire into the existence of ties between oratorical and historical activity that are closer than mere exterior kinship. From the point of view of historical study this investigation is necessitated by the current difficulty in establishing a connection between the epistemological approach to history, which emphasizes the degree of scientific validity of historical explanation, and the approach that might best be called literary, which tends to focus on the manner in which history is written. To call this a difficulty is to understate the nature of the problem. In truth we are currently witnessing a progressive divorce between theories centered on the question of proof in history, and those theories oriented toward investigations of the ways in which historical narrative uses style in order to present the past by giving an illusion of a real presence. In some sense this divorce reproduces the one that divides the field of rhetoric between those who, like Charles Perelman, hold that a theory of argumentation is the only true issue for rhetoric, and those others, like the Russian Formalists and their French imitators, who have restored the tropological approach to a place of honor. Should not the task of a critical philosophy of history be to argue against this dismemberment? Should it not instead strive to harmonize *research and writing* within a unified framework of historical activity, in the same way that argumentation and tropology were once harmonized in the progression joining *inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria, pronuntiatio* within a public discourse destined for deliberative bodies of political, judiciary, or sumptuary character?

This being my hypothesis, I will now take up the three successive stages of historical activity: documentary research, explanation, and writing. While doing so I will inquire into the manner in which borrowings from the rhetoric of argumentation—including both the stages of *inventio* and *dispositio* of Ancient rhetoric, and the borrowings from the rhetoric of tropes, which constitutes the core of the *elocutio*—contribute to a better understanding of historical activity.

Documentary Research and *inventio*

Even the initial phase of documentary research, which is the gathering of “sources,” amply demonstrates that historical activ-

ity involves a rhetorical dimension comparable to the *inventio*. Equally, the *inventio* of the Ancients was not merely a search for arguments but of proofs capable of establishing both the topic and content of the discourse: material or factual proofs, artificial proofs, that is to say derived from art and that the treatises have also called “occasions” (*lieux*). However, in historical research too the sources are essentially composed of accounts of witness whose credibility has to be weighed. Of course, unlike public discourse whose aim is to please rather than convince, the gathering of sources involves a critical approach that already anticipates the argumentative character of history. The source here takes on a documentary value, and the verification of an historical fact through a convergence of sources can lay claim to being documentary evidence. Yet this opposition of *inventio* and documentary criticism is not absolute. Any gathering of sources is guided by a working hypothesis that is already dependent on the explanatory phase. This orientation of the inquiry has two aspects, both of which invite comparison with the *inventio*. On the one hand, spurred by its investigative question, the search for documents takes on an unlimited scope; for contemporary historians anything can become a document; market price-lists, parish records, wills, lists of statistical data, graphs, etc. Anything that an historian can *question* (*interroger*) becomes a document, since information about the past can be found there. In this sense modern historical research can be characterized by what Paul Veyne calls “the lengthening of the questionnaire”; yet it is the explanatory hypothesis itself that determines this lengthening. Thus, on the other hand, the widening of potential documentary sources has as its counterpart a strict selection process regarding which of the remaining parts can be promoted to the rank of document. In this sense nothing in itself is a document, even if all residue of the past is a potential trace. From this point of view, research and explanation now become complementary activities, as if *inventio* and *compositio* were entangled in an all-inclusive notion of historical research. To this observation it will later be necessary to add that an explanatory hypothesis is also ultimately a compositional structure, and that therefore explanation and writing—relatives of *compositio* and *elocutio*—conjointly preside over *inventio*, which

in historical study takes the form of source criticism and the problematics of documentary evidence. In this way the argumentative character of historical activity is already anticipated in the documentary phase.

Historical explanation and *dispositio*

This argumentative character comes most clearly to the fore on the level of explanation. It is my assertion that the critique to which the nomological model of Carl G. Hempel (commonly designated the "covering law model" or CLM) has been subjected over the last few decades amounts to an acknowledgment of an epistemological status for history; an acknowledgment based on probable logic and thus also of rhetoric considered as the antistrophe of dialectic in the Aristotelian sense of the term. What was considered as a "weakening" of the CLM was in fact an evolutionary process leading from necessary logic to probable logic; it was not, as has been too easily asserted, the removal of history's scientific status and subsequent re-classification as an art. Although historical proof does not go beyond the verification of isolated facts based on a convergence of testimony (that is to say does not go beyond what is called documentary evidence), history nevertheless persists in arguing in favor of an explanation, that is to say, a sequence of facts that are opposed to another plausible sequence.

Let us now, as regards argumentation, take a look at several of the arguments advanced by some theoreticians laying claim to the heritage of analytic philosophy: Arthur Danto, W.B. Gallie, Charles Frankel, William Dray, and above all Louis O. Mink. It must first be conceded that the historian him or herself does not establish the laws that figure in the major premise of Hempel's deduction but rather is limited to using these laws, which in some sense is reminiscent of the theory of "occasions" of ancient rhetoric. Moreover, it has been observed that historians make use of a very heterogeneous set of rules regarding levels of universality, that the range of acceptable answers to the question of *why* in history is very broad, and that the idea of cause in history has a widely-accepted polysemy. Another observation: the "weighing"

of the degrees of importance of such or such presumed cause depends on a logic of “pretensions,” “refutations,” and “guarantees” that Stephen E. Toulmin thoroughly analyses in a study appropriately entitled *The Uses of Argument*. In this book Toulmin emphasizes, as we did at the outset of this article, how much argument depends on competition between rival interpretations among which a choice must be made.

There exist numerous other connecting frameworks, irreducible to the CLM schema, that are nevertheless endowed with an effective explanatory power. In this sense the explanations found in works of history constitute a logically disparate assemblage, and the term “because” implies no logically predetermined structure. For the purposes of this article I will limit myself to several examples of sequence where the idea of law is succinctly expressed. We will begin with the imputation of singular causality, independently analyzed by Max Weber, Raymond Aron and William Dray: here the test of a candidate’s claim to occupying the place of determinant cause will be based on imagining its absence and by comparing the consequences of this absence with the best attested probable course of events. Another explanatory framework would be an explanation based on reasons (the “rational” explanation according to Dray); and the argument would consist of a reconstruction of the agent’s calculation, taking into account the considerations that convinced the agent that he should act as he did. A more refined approach to explanation, based on the concept of intervention, has been proposed by George Henrik Von Wright in his book *Explanation and Understanding*. Intervention, from the point of view of the agent, is the attempt to carry out a practicable action that will coincide with the initial stage of a system whose determining closure is caused by setting the system in motion. On the basis of this connection between an intuitively understood “I can” and a causal nexus dependent on an explanatory system, it becomes possible to conjoin, using a mixed model on the level of history, a teleological explanation bearing on intentions with a causal explanation bearing on states of a system. The title of Von Wright’s work is well chosen: it can be said that his mixed model belongs to a treatise on argumentation in which argument implies reconciling explanation and understanding.

Having completed this rapid survey of a variety of frameworks used to establish historical connection, we can now return to our initial question: to what extent can the various ways of arguing be identified with the *dispositio* of traditional rhetoric? The answer to this question will be a cautiously positive one, with the necessary caveats enumerated below. What allows us to use the term *compositio* for the various forms of sequencing proposed by historians who strive to explain facts uncovered by source criticism is the narrative form that historical explanation—even the forms of historical explanation closest to the nomological model—inevitably takes on. Let us analyze, for example, the case of an accidental explosion of a gas tank: one could well detail a series of laws relating to the resistance of materials, to overheating, etc.: yet the crucial point is that the case be recounted *seratim*, by reconstituting each phase of the accident, which then takes on the form of a story. As a general rule it must be conceded that even a story as disparate as possible from the kind that the *Annales* school called “event-oriented history” (*histoire événementielle*), that is to say the narration of brief events that punctuate political, diplomatic and military history in particular, would still require a narrative form in order to account for the changes that a nation, a State, a social class—in short any historical entity—goes through, taking it from an initial to a terminal phase by way of a series of transformations. Among the latter must be included even those events that have been reduced to “an observed discontinuity in a model.”¹ From this standpoint the narrative form is not merely superimposed on the explanation (in one of the senses enumerated above) but is consubstantial with it, as the inevitable obedience to chronology bears witness. What narratology as the science of story has shown is that the story (*récit*), even in its popular and folklore forms, has an inherent explanatory value. It does not limit itself to saying: the King died, the Queen died. It says: the King died, then the Queen died of grief. A “because” has sneaked in between the two events, testifying to the fact that even the most insubstantial story contains a passage from “this and then that” to “this because of that.” It is the story’s inherent explanatory potential that history raises to a higher critical level, and in so doing makes the narrative connection itself a mode of argument.

This explanatory capability has been particularly stressed by the English language "narrative" school of history. Of the authors mentioned above I will here only recall Louis O. Mink: besides the fact that his work most fully embodies the thesis of the explanatory value of narrative form, it is also the first step in the transition from the question of explanation to the question of writing which I will take up later. Let us for the moment limit our discussion to the relationship between narrativity and explanation. Mink proposes a concept of narrative explanation that is strongly reminiscent of the idea of *dispositio* of traditional rhetoric. What he calls understanding is relevant beyond the field of history and can indeed be applied to any judgmental activity whose aim is to "hold together," in a single image, a medley of experiences undergone *seriatim*. Story is only one of its modes, that is to say the configuring mode, linking events, episodes and periods in a single sequence or within a complex whole invested with its own identity. Through this concept Mink rediscovers the idea of "colligation," which he learned from his teacher Walsh; and with Mink the story's very form becomes a cognitive tool.

Does this mean that *dispositio* and *historical understanding* are completely synonymous? The key here is not that story is but a form of understanding and therefore one form of *compositio* among others. What is crucial is what I will cautiously call the filiation between history as a social science and the traditional story. However, at the very same time that the extreme complexity of the story was being emphasized by the narratologists, the opponents of historical narrative, in particular the French *Annales* school, continued to underestimate the organizational resources of the story. Happily, this was not the case with all French historians. Paul Veyne, for instance, in *How History is Written*², made use of the notion of plot or intrigue, which comes from Aristotle's *Poetics*, as the driving force of historical knowledge: a plot, he wrote, is "a very human and very 'unscientific' mixture of material causes, of ends and accidents." For as long as this disparate combination can be recognized as such there is a plot. From this point of view an event is not only, as has been claimed, a noticeable discontinuity in a structure; rather, in order to invest it with meaning, the event must first be told, that is to say situated

within a story in the form of a plot and its peripeties. Limiting ourselves to this perspective we can say, with Paul Veyne, that “to explain more requires telling it better.” But what does it mean to explain more? It is here that the epistemological divide between scholarly history and the traditional story, which narrativist conceptions of historiography ignore, must be taken into account. With the introduction of “research-oriented history” (*histoire-recherche*), which François Furet contrasts with “narrative history” (*histoire-récit*), the explanatory form is made autonomous by becoming the stake of a game of authentication and justification; contributing to this process is, on the one hand, the enormous labor of conceptualization that is applied to the universals created by historical study (serfdom, the industrial revolution, etc.); on the other hand, there is the slicing up of a segment of the past into various levels (economic, social, political, intellectual, etc.) that must later be reconstituted within the limiting concept of total history; finally, there is the pluralization of historical time, of which Braudel’s division into short-term, long-term, and quasi-immobile geographic time is one of the best illustrations. In all these activities a disparity is created between the level of naively narrative story-telling and the critical level of comprehensive explanation offered by professional historians. This is why I was able to assert that filiation on the basis of narrative understanding remained indirect.

In concluding this section it can be said that in spite of the manifold aspects of this epistemological separation, history continues to maintain a relationship of indirect filiation with the narrative form—this because even the least event-oriented historical discourse deals with temporal changes that affect human activity. By means of this indirect derivation narrative form gains explanatory value and takes its place within argumentative logic, which itself continues the *dispositio* of traditional rhetoric.

However, as mentioned above, the study of narrative form can not be limited to the epistemology of historical research; as a literary form it is already part of the writing of history. There is therefore a continuous back-and-forth between explanation and writing; or, to stay within the vocabulary of rhetorical categories, the narrative form is situated within the curve of *dispositio* and *elocutio*.

The Writing of History and *elocutio*

It is indeed at this stage of rhetoric's intrusion into the field of historical theory that a host of new uncertainties and even grave theoretical difficulties arises. Exploiting them effectively and radically some contemporary authors have succeeded in turning the investigation of history as writing against the investigation of history as research; as a result the theory of history has broken loose from epistemology altogether to become part of the field of literary criticism.

An augur of this reversal was already visible in Mink's work: in his stress on the cognitive nature of narrative form (the title of Mink's last essay was "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument") the distinction between history and fiction was blurred to the point of indistinguishability. History, it is said, strives to be a true story. But what are we to make of this claim if the narrative form of history is the only thing considered? What is in question here is the story's status as *representation* of the past. It is with this question that the problem of the writing of history really begins to be posed; and it is here that the conflict between *scientific* and *literary* criteria begins.

In this third stage of our study we are no longer dealing with rhetoric considered as a theory of argumentation: we are dealing with rhetoric as a theory of tropology. Earlier, in exploring this polarization of rhetoric, we found that the thread linking *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio* was broken. In large measure it was during the transition from the system of oral discourse to written discourse that *elocutio* was first freed from the broader rhetorical tradition, to be gradually narrowed until finally reduced to what Gérard Genette has called "limited rhetoric," (*rhétorique restreinte*), that is, limited to the pair metaphor-metonymy. But tropology itself had already established its own "limited rhetoric" within *elocutio*, in the same way that *elocutio* had given rise to an initial "limited rhetoric" in relation to a larger rhetorical system in which *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio* were part parts of a single discursive process.

Applied to the writing of history, the critique of rhetoric served as a weapon in the battle against what was deemed to be the naive

representation of the past. This representation was considered a literary artifice whose hidden springs were to be revealed. What was absolutely new in all this was the polemical use to which rhetoric, now identified with ideological criticism, was subjected. In identifying rhetoric in this way it became a tool to be viewed with suspicion.

On the Anglo-Saxon side the decisive moment was the publication, in 1973, of Hayden White's book, *Metahistory, the Historical Imagination in XIXth Century Europe*, followed by *Tropics of Discourse* in 1978 and *The Content of the Form* in 1987. White calls this new approach metahistorical because it bears on interpretive strategies that govern the entire field of history, both the work of the philosophers of history (Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Croce) and its working historians (Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, Burckhardt). The point of departure for the investigation of this paradigm is fundamentally formalist; that is, the distinction between literary fiction and historiography is held to be of little importance; and the same holds for the distinction between historiography and the speculative philosophy of history. White begins by arranging, according to an ascending scale, the levels of conceptualization present in any work of history, under the assumption that beneath the first level lies nothing more than "the unprocessed historical record"; in other words data devoid of any order before history imprints its meaning on them—a meaning dependent on the paradigms detailed below. I will say nothing about the four paradigms that govern *emplotment*, nor about those regulating explanation by argument, nor those that guide explanation based on ideological implication. If we limited ourselves to these three levels *Metahistory* could still be harmonized with the narrativist approach in which story as such is treated as an explanatory mode. It is the last series of four paradigms that causes historical theory to tilt definitively in favor of literature over science. These paradigms, which no theorist before Hayden White took into consideration, derive directly from tropology: we are speaking of the four major tropes taken up by Ramus and Vico: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. For what reason does White grant such primacy to tropology? The answer to this question lies in a problematic element of narrativist theory that investigators like Mink brought to light without being

about to solve it convincingly: that is, the ambition, which is the foundation of the distinction between history and fiction, to turn narrative structure into a model, an icon of the past, capable of *representing* it. How does tropology meet this challenge? The answer: "before a field can be interpreted it must first be constructed so that there is a ground inhabited by discernible figures." In order to present "what really happened" in the past, the historian must first *prefigure* the totality of events supplied by the documents. The function of this poetic activity is to trace, within "the historical field," all possible routes and thus give a preliminary profile to potential objects of knowledge. The design here is certainly directed toward retrieving what really happened in the past; the paradox is that this anterior state can not be identified without its being *prefigured*.

We can, in any case, question whether the reliance on tropology has not the inverse effect to the one sought; this being to explain the way in which history claims to represent the reality of the past. As a prefiguration of the historical field as such, the topological approach denies any autonomous meaning to the idea of a real past invested with its own structure. Before the prefiguration there is no organized anything capable of being represented. The author is explicit: "It is by figuration that history forms a true subject of discourse." Here the idea of icon is sharply contrasted with that of model, in the sense that there is nothing originally given to which the model can be compared. To this idea another key concept is linked: "what gives a work of history its structure is not a careful reconstruction of the past but an act of poetic creativity." This last statement has far-ranging implications: in spite of White's insistence concerning the question of representation in history, it is not the faithfulness of that representation which interests him; it is the freedom of strategic choices that governs the organization of the field of history. For this reason the sub-title of *Metahistory* should not be forgotten: *the Historical Imagination in XIXth Century Europe* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). In the final analysis the true glory of the imagination is its power of innovation. In this sense Hans Kellner, whose work will be discussed below, is correct in classing White in the great line of Renaissance humanists who, from Lorenzo Vala to Ramus and

then on to Vico, replaced logic with rhetoric. Now we can see why tropology wins out over explanation (even as a means of argument), why in tropology irony wins out over metaphor, and why *Metahistory* can be read entirely as an exercise in irony. However, one result of this transformation is that it becomes difficult to choose between two disparate readings of the system of paradigms governing the historical imagination; are we speaking here of a stable and closed system, as it is sometimes claimed, or rather being offered a manual to a game of unlimited combinations among the four tropes—a game leading to an endless process of deconstruction under the aegis of irony?

It is this second interpretation that dominates Hans Kellner's *Language and Historical Representation, Getting the Story Crooked* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1989). Rather than trying to solve the logical dilemma concerning the representation of the past, Kellner chooses to exacerbate it by further sharpening the rhetoric of suspicion that was used by Roland Barthes in his book "The Effect of Reality" (*L'effet du réel*).

The target of Kellner's attack is double: on the one hand is the belief "that there is a history out there that needs to be told"; on the other, the claim "that this history can be told straight by an honest and industrious historian using the correct method." Against the first presupposition the author has no difficulty in restating the oft-repeated assertion that history does not exist until it is constructed and written. He shows more originality in asserting that language and its *rhetoric* constitute another source—along with archival and computer-generated materials—and that this other source brings something different than order to historical invention. With this assertion one of the basic axioms of the narrativist school of history is challenged head-on: the setting in motion of the plot is not equivalent to the establishment of order. Rather, the ideas of complete form, of coherence and closure, are themselves suspect claims whose only real defense is the anxiety generated by the idea of disorder. There is, as Foucault asserted as well, something willed and ultimately regressive in the imposition of order. The argument in favor of discontinuity begins at the initial stage, with the consideration of the document, which the archive had endowed with a halo of authority. It is not only that the debris

of the past is scattered; so is the testimony to that past. Moreover, the field of documentation itself adds its own effects of “selective destruction” to the other ways by which supposed historical “evidence” is distorted through the loss of information. Rhetoric is therefore not something added to the documentation: it is part of it from the start. Here one might hope that the narrative form itself could provide an antidote to the anguish provoked by the lacunas in the documentary evidence. However, for its part the story form gives rise to new anxieties tied to other discontinuities. It is here that White’s approach to tropology enters the picture. The tropological reading, it is said, is only “bothersome”—and therefore a source of new anxiety—if a new system, based on White’s four tetrads, fails to be constructed over it. The so-called “bedrock of order” must itself be understood as an allegorical game in which irony is acknowledged as the master trope inside the system as well as the overall point of view of the system. Ultimately all tropology is ironic, pledged to the thousand “turns” that allow linguistic structures to create meaning. White can therefore be suspected of having retreated, with a mixture of sympathy and ... anxiety, in the face of what he calls, at the end of *Tropics of Discourse*, “the absurdist moment.” This systematic application of tropology is equivalent to a synechdochic treatment (whole/part) of irony itself, which must remain the all-purpose trope. While rhetoric was supposed to destabilize logic, the final result is “a voluntarist rhetoric that restrains a deconstructive antilogic.” But if this deconstructive antilogic is given into, the destructive progression of tropological inflation appears to become limitless. And once the figures of discourse themselves become figures of thought, tropology itself becomes virtually irrelevant. Moreover, there seems to be little left for historians to learn from a critical enterprise that seeks not to uncover dissimulated chaos disguised as order, but rather one in which the historian’s craft, as an institutionalized discipline as such, is treated as a willful and organized resistance to the very enterprise of “getting the story crooked”. Paradoxically, the defender of rhetoric here finds him or herself in a situation comparable to that of the defender of the *covering law model*; while the latter tried to tell the historian how to write history, the former now tells the defender of rhetoric how history

itself can no longer be written. If the philosophy of history has turned away from the workplace in which the contemporary historian labors, is it not because rhetoric, occupying the entire field, has claimed for itself the phases of both documentary research and explanation? When everything is rhetoric the question of truth evaporates, and with it historical reality. This is done by assigning to the defenders of historical reality the simplistic thesis that the past, in order to be real, must have the form of a story waiting to be told. At the end of this article I will try to outline a concept for the reality of the past in which what has really happened does not require a pre-existent narrative form in order to be known.

For the time being I will rely on the spontaneous realism of the historian, the kind implicit in what can be called the intentionality of historical consciousness. The strategy of suspicion, which is employed by both the proponents of the "effect of reality" and by those authors desirous of "getting the story crooked," is equivalent to treating the historian as such as an illusion-maker, at times even an explorer seized with panic at the idea of venturing onto shaky ground. I will oppose to this perverted understanding of rhetoric those aspects of the intentionality of historical consciousness that tend to justify the historian's inclination to take his constructions for reconstructions of something that once was and no longer is.

To start, however, I must take exception to the kind of definition of historical realism to which the opponents of historical realism try to limit its defenders. Either, they say, the past is an *untold story*, or it is a formless chaos until the story itself exists. This presumed—and extremely crude—definition of realism depends on the predication of a direct correspondence between the past and its representation; in the worst case this correspondence is assumed to be one of image to copy, in the best case a projection similar to a cartographer's, obeying rules of transposition that are in fact undiscoverable. The real challenge, in my view, is to reformulate in more subtle terms the historian's spontaneous realism, while keeping in mind the perfectly justified rejection of the truth-as-correspondence thesis as applied to the representation of the past. There exists, beyond the pair *untold story* / formlessness, a third solution, one that seems to be spontaneously presumed by historical intentionality itself, without however being consciously

adopted by it. I am referring to the presupposition that history has for its subject people like you and me, who act and suffer within circumstances that they themselves did not create, and with results both desired and undesired. This presupposition links historical theory to a theory of action. Inverting the same presupposition, we can say that human action requires, in order to be understood, a story that will uncover its fundamental connections. We can thus agree with Hannah Arendt in saying that it is the *story's* duty to express the "who" of action; or, more broadly, with Paul Veyne, to say that history articulates the plot of action by coordinating intentions, causes and accidents. The path linking history to action can thus be traveled in either direction: from story to action, to the extent that story—according to Aristotle's formulation—is *mimesis praxeôs*; or from action to story, to the extent that action is, in one way or another, a demand for story.

This first response to the antirealist attack—an attack based on treating rhetoric as a weapon to be viewed with suspicion—still leaves unresolved the enigma associated with the what-was-and-no-longer-is, which is the literal mystery of the past. At the very least it can be asserted that the terms "past" applies to an event of acting-suffering that transcends the alternative *untold story* / the indeterminate. What is past is a particular field of praxis, invested with structures dependent on a theory of action. What remains to be specified is the nature of the relationship between historians writing about the past and the past quality of the acting-suffering of human beings who have acted and suffered as we do.

A second answer can now be given, although it will remain merely formal at this stage of the discussion. The historian, it can be said, exists in the same spatio-temporal framework as does the object of his study. History, it has not often enough been pointed out, is one of the rare modes of knowledge in which the subject and object belong not only to the same practical field but to the same temporal one as well. Although we are here only referring to the chronological aspect of historiography, it remains true that in order for an event to be considered historic it must be dateable. Whatever the character—constructed or reconstructed—of the sequence of events of a particular period, the very same system is used to date the three temporal events that constitute the period

under consideration; that is, the beginning of the period under consideration, its end or conclusion, and the present of the historian (more precisely, of the historical enunciation). Thanks to this single system of dating, which includes the historical object and the historian subject, both the events whose trail (*trace*) is found in the documents, and the event that consists in recounting these tracks or traces, are assumed to take place in the same universe as the occurrences studied by the natural sciences. This implicit conviction is an important component of the historian's realism.

A third step in the direction of what might be called a critical realism of historical knowledge can be taken by observing that historiography is itself a praxis. Thus Michel de Certeau speaks of "historical activity" in order to designate the operation that consists of "making history." However, this present activity has a complex relationship to the activity of the people of the past who themselves "made history." Along with formal adherence to a single spatio-temporal framework linking the historian's activity to the same system of dating as the events being described, we can also speak of material adherence to a single field of praxis, evidenced by the historian's dependence on the "making" of real historical actors for his own history "making." Before presenting themselves as master craftsmen of stories made out of the past, historians must first stand as heirs to the past. This idea of inheritance presupposes that the past in some sense lives in the present and therefore affects it. It is this passive dimension of historical inheritance that is best expressed by the idea of historical *debt*. Before even forming the idea of re-presenting the past, we are in debt to the men and women of the past who contributed to making us what we are. Before we can represent the past we must live as beings affected by the past.

This notion of debt allows us to revive the notion of track or trail (*trace*), whose implications for history Marc Bloch implicitly acknowledged when he defined history as "knowledge by tracks." The relationship between a track and the thing of which it is a trace is not that of copy or cartographic projection: rather it is the vicarious function of standing-in-place-of (*lieu-tenance*), which the German language skillfully expresses by distinguishing between *Vertretung* (representation, substitution) and *Vorstellung* (presenta-

tion, idea). *Vorstellung* is the mental image that the subject creates of an absent thing. *Vertretung* is the relationship by means of which a representative takes the place of the thing represented in its absence. Such is the case with a trace. The indirectness of the referent inherent in the relationship of history to the past is characteristic of this vicarious function.

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This defense of the referential function of history leads me to express the relationship between history and rhetoric in the following terms. It was a by a kind of perversion that tropology was made to serve an ideological critique that interpreted the desire to please as a desire to seduce and deceive. This inflation of tropology was a result of the uprising of tropology against argumentation; yet argumentation should have remained the center of gravity of the epistemology of history. Finally, the preeminent role of argumentation can only be restored if explanation itself is not separated from the search for documentary evidence. Thus we find ourselves bound to retrace in reverse order the sequence of the great rhetorical tradition: from *elocutio* to *inventio* by way of *dispositio*. Only by so doing can rhetoric remain, as Aristotle wanted it, the “antistrophe” of dialectic in the sense of a logic of the probable.

Translated by Thomas Epstein

Notes

1. Kristofz Pomian. *L'Ordre du Temps* (Paris, 1984) 33.
2. Paul Veyne. *Comment on écrit l'histoire* (Paris, 1979).