

NOTES AND DISCUSSION

Alfred Stern

FICTION AND MYTH IN HISTORY

Fiction and myth have been used for centuries in writing history as well as in making it. And this is not surprising; for Clio was not only the muse of history but also that of epic poetry. This personal union of the two functions shows that the Greeks may have felt what we know today, thanks to the additional experience of twenty-five hundred years: that in historiography as well as in its subject matter, history as reality, it is not always possible to draw a neat line of demarcation between historical truth and poetical fiction. History as *res scriptae* is, and has to be, a product of documentation and imagination. If this imagination is subjected to logical methodology, it will result in "scientific" history, in which the word "science" has to be interpreted in that liberal sense proposed by Collingwood, as "any organized body of knowledge."¹ If, on the contrary, the imaginative component of historiography is abandoned to poetical fancy, it will result in *mythological* history. Finally, if the imagination of the historian is guided by the conscious, half-conscious or sub-conscious wish to influence and manipulate the readers' minds, the result will be *ideological* history.

¹ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1949), p. 249.

Of course, these distinctions are logical abstractions. The realities with which the psychologist and the social scientist are confronted show various mixtures of the types of imagination mentioned. Plutarch reported that Philip of Macedonia found a serpent lying by his wife Olympias as she slept. But "in reality" this serpent was the god Ammon. With other ancient historians Plutarch derived from this "fact" the possibility of Alexander the Great's divine origin. In this case the imaginative part of the historiographer was not only abandoned to poetical fancy but—probably—also guided by the wish to influence, manipulate and direct the readers' minds into a certain ideological direction. For the public belief in a personal union between kingship and divinity was as useful and desirable to the Roman Emperors of Plutarch's time as it had been to the ancient Macedonian kings.

MACHIAVELLI'S DIRECTIONS FOR THE USE OF MYTHS

Not only written history is, however, full of myths. History as reality is not less subjected to the power of myth, and it is well known that Niccolo Machiavelli was the *princeps sophisticorum* who, in his *Il Principe*, developed an unrivalled practical methodology of the use of myth in history. Therefore he commended enthusiastically the astute ways in which, according to Titus Livius, the ruling classes of ancient Rome created religious myths, in order to further their political interests. There was, for example, the establishment of tribunes with consular powers, which did not have the result the patricians had desired; for in the elections all but one of these tribunes had been chosen from the plebeian order. When, in the same year, a plague and famine broke out in Rome, the nobles availed themselves of this occurrence to propagate the myth that the gods were irate, because, by the election of plebeian tribunes, Rome had offended the majesty of her empire. The result was that, out of religious fear, the people elected new tribunes, all noblemen.

Machiavelli also quotes approvingly the way in which the Roman rulers used an extraordinary rise of the Lake Albano for the conquest of the city of Veii. When the Roman soldiers,

tired of a long siege, wanted to return home, the ruling "élite" created the myth that Apollo had predicted the fall of the city of Veii in the year when Lake Albano would overflow its banks. The belief in this story, linked to the visible phenomenon of the overflowing lake, gave the Roman soldiers new strength and courage, so that Camillus, who had been made Dictator, could conquer the city.

Machiavelli concludes triumphantly by writing: "And thus religion, well used, promoted the conquest of that city and the restitution of the tribunate to the patricians," adding "*che senza detto mezzo difficilmente si sarebbe condotto e l'uno e l'altro,*" i.e., without the means mentioned, either the one or the other would hardly have been accomplished.²

Uniquely interested in the practical results of these procedures Machiavelli did not analyze their logical structure. But, evidently, to their inventors these supernatural interpretations of natural events were *fictions* in Vaihinger's sense. For, according to this neo-Kantian and neo-Nietzschean philosopher, fictions are conscious falsifications of reality "which not only contradict reality, but are also self-contradictory" (*in sich selbst widerspruchsvoll*). Yet they are "justified" by their "expediency" or "fitness" (*Zweckmässigkeit*) with respect to the purposes for which they have been created.³ To those, however, who *believed* in these falsifications and acted accordingly these fictions became *myths*.

In inviting the Christian princes "to act against faith, against charity, against humanity, against religion" (*operare contro alla fede, contro alla carità, contro alla umanità, contro alla religione*), but always to "seem (*parere*) merciful, faithful, humane, religious"⁴ Machiavelli summons them consciously to create fictitious images of themselves, which the outsiders, by their *belief*, would convert into myths. By these fictions, disguised as myths, the princes could then influence historical developments as well

² *Discorsi di Niccolò Machiavelli sopra le Deche di Tito Livio*, capitolo decimoterzo, 57.

³ H. Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*, 7-8. Auflage (Leipzig, 1922), pp. 24, 152.

⁴ *Il Principe di Niccolò Machiavelli*, Cap. XVIII, 65.

as historical knowledge—the latter to the extent to which the historians could be fooled.

Of course, Machiavelli's recipes were based on a very low estimate of the masses' capacity of judgment, and since his days growing literary and progressing democracy have raised the level of public opinion. Yet, anyone who has studied Gustave Lebon's *Psychologie des Foules* and Ortega y Gasset's *La Rebelión de las Masas* and observed the behavior of the masses during the years of Mussolini's and Hitler's triumphs will not consider as outdated Machiavelli's judgment that "the world consists only of the vulgar." And those who, nowadays, observe the desperate struggle of the minority of non-conformists will also realize that Machiavelli is still right in insisting on the isolation of the few who are not vulgar.⁵

THE TRANSVALUATION OF TRUTH: KANT AND NIETZSCHE

During the first half of the twentieth century we could observe a revival of myths in political history, especially in Mussolini's Fascism and Hitler's National Socialism. Yet this new historical mythology presents some features which were absent in that of the ancients and in the one which was propagated by Machiavelli: it has theoretical, philosophical foundations. Machiavelli's doctrine was nothing but a practical methodology of gaining and preserving power, and its only theoretical principle was a "moral" one, which he expressed in the well-known terms, "the aim justifies the means." The apologia of the myth used in twentieth-century history is, however, based on a new epistemology, a new theory of truth. I think that an investigation of the development of this new theory of truth reveals the fact that logically the concept of *myth*, as it is used in political history, is intimately linked to the notion of *fiction*.

One of the first great thinkers in modern times who recognized the philosophical importance of fictitious constructs was Immanuel Kant. His writing is full of what he called "*heuristische Fiktionen*," "regulative principles," "postulates of practical reason," etc., etc. The teleological consideration of

⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

nature, for example, was to Kant nothing but a fictitious assumption for heuristic purposes. "The special empirical laws of nature," he wrote, "must be considered according to such a unity *as if* (*als ob*)...an intelligence (*ein Verstand*)—although not ours—had established them. Not as if in this manner such an intelligence had really (*wirklich*) to be assumed..."⁶

After Maimon, Forberg, Schleiermacher, Lotze, Lange and others had further developed Kant's theory of fictions, Friedrich Nietzsche arrived, independently, at new insights into the role of fictions in our thought processes. While for Kant the necessity of fictitious assumptions was based on epistemological and moral grounds, Nietzsche believed that fictions were indispensable for *life* and its main function: *action*. For example, in his challenging book *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (Beyond Good and Evil) Nietzsche declared bluntly:

The falseness of a proposition is not for us any objection to it... The question is how far it is life-furthering, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-rearing (*artzüchtend*); and we are fundamentally inclined to maintain that the falsest propositions (to which the synthetic judgments *a priori* belong) are the most indispensable to us; that without a recognition of logical *fictions*, without a comparison of reality with the purely imagined world of the unconditional and self-identical, without a constant counterfeiting of the world by numbers, man would not be able to live; that a renunciation of false ideas would be a renunciation of *life*, a negation of life. To recognize untruth as a condition of life: this certainly means to challenge the accustomed value-feeling in a dangerous way; and a philosophy which ventures to do so does thereby alone place itself—beyond good and evil.⁷

Elsewhere Nietzsche insists on the necessity of illusions and false opinions especially for *action*. "Life needs illusions, that is untruths taken for truths," he says, and: "In order to act you must believe in errors, and you will still act according to these errors, after you have recognized them as errors."⁸

⁶ I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Einleitung IV, 17.

⁷ F. Nietzsche, *Gesammelte Werke* (München, 1922-1929), Band XV, ph. 8, 9, 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Band VI, 17; Band XXI, 104.

With these words of Nietzsche emerges that great transvaluation of truth which, developed by modern philosophy of life and by pragmatism, became also a powerful instrument of our century's political philosophy. "In spite of the value which may belong to the true, the positive and the unselfish," Nietzsche wrote, "it might be possible that a higher and more fundamental value for life generally should be assigned to pretence, to the will to delusion, to selfishness and cupidity."⁷ When Nietzsche wrote these words at the end of the nineteenth century, he could hardly foresee to what extent the makers of twentieth-century history would use this principle.

VAIHINGER: THE VICTORIOUS "AS IF"

Influenced by Kant's and Nietzsche's ideas as well as by Schopenhauer's voluntarism and his conception of the intellect as an instrument of the will to live and dominate, the German thinker Hans Vaihinger (1852-1933) developed his famous *Philosophy of "As If"* (*Die Philosophie des Als Ob*), in which he analyzed the theoretical, practical and religious fictions of mankind. As a Kantian he was convinced that our perceptions and thoughts cannot reveal to us absolute reality. Therefore Vaihinger asked us to abandon all attempts at *knowing* reality and to consider our thoughts merely as means or tools to perfect and enrich human life. Thus truth and error lose their character of correct or incorrect descriptions of reality and become means of controlling or dominating reality. Although they cannot represent reality, our concepts and ideas are not useless, since they are instruments, allowing us to act within reality and to find our way in it.

With these views Vaihinger evidently came very close to Dewey's Instrumentalism. However, what is essential in Vaihinger's philosophy is the thesis that those conceptual tools used by our minds are theoretical *falsifications* (*Fälschungen*), intellectual *transformations* and *distortions* of reality. Our mind transforms reality in such a way as to allow us to dominate it most conveniently and with greatest success. In short, our mind works with *fictions* and dominates reality only by means of fictions. Our logical mind constructs fictions and uses them

as auxiliary concepts and methods, although they clearly show that no real object can possibly correspond to them. As most typical examples of fictions Vaihinger mentioned the thing in itself and atoms. If the atom is a fiction, one might ask, how about the tremendous practical success of the atomic theory in chemistry and physics? How about the latest triumphs of this theory in the release of atomic energy and the production of atomic bombs and ships? Those who have seen the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki will hardly consider the atom a mere fiction.

Vaihinger died in 1933. Thus he did not live to witness the tragic events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the possibility of constructing atomic submarines and surface ships probably never occurred to him. Nevertheless, I believe that these scientific and technological realizations would not have changed Vaihinger's opinion. For it was exactly his doctrine that in spite of being theoretically contradictory concepts, fictions bring about tremendous practical success. According to him a fiction is a "legitimized error (*ein legitimierter Irrtum*)...which has to justify its subsistence by its success."⁹ Our mind feigns such an order of things which allows it to deal with them most successfully. In other words, we think "as if" (*als ob*) reality behaved in the most useful manner with respect to our practical intentions. The chemist and physicist consider matter "as if" it were composed of atoms, although (according to Vaihinger) nothing similar corresponds to them in reality. However, chemists and physicists use this concept with great success, in order to embody their laws.

Vaihinger strongly insisted that *fictions* should not be confused with *hypotheses*. Every hypothesis submits its reality to the test and demands *verification*. On principle, an hypothesis is verifiable. On the contrary, a fiction is never verifiable. Contradicting reality, distorting it, it cannot, on principle, be verified as a true picture of reality. But if it cannot be *verified* it must, at least, be *justified*, by the service it renders. Unjustifiable fictions must be eliminated. An hypothesis must be probable, a fiction must be suitable, efficient.

⁹ H. Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*, Kap. XXV, p. 190.

FICTIONS IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Like all other disciplines, historiography too uses fictitious constructs abundantly. But while most historians are well aware of their doings whenever they establish an hypothesis, I am not sure that they use fictitious constructs with the same degree of awareness. Yet, even when writing a biography of an historical personality they cannot do anything but construct a fictitious being. In his criticism of historiography René Descartes came very close to this insight. In his *Discours de la Méthode* the father of modern philosophy insisted that "even the most faithful histories, if they neither change nor increase the value of things in order to make them more worthy of being read, at least omit almost always the lowest and the least illustrious circumstances, with the result that the remainder does not appear as it is..."¹⁰

This omission of a great number of circumstances—and not only of those which Descartes called "*les plus basses et moins illustres*" is an unavoidable necessity for historiography. The historian who, for example, writes the history of Julius Caesar *must* omit a thousand circumstances of his hero's life—to begin with, all those for which no documentary evidence is available. But even among the circumstances known by documents the historian must eliminate a great number. In the first place all the permanent features which his hero shares with all other men, such as the organic functions of his body or his everyday life. The historian can take interest only in the traits which are particular to his hero, those which he does not share with everybody and which distinguish him from the great mass of non-historic beings. Historical evolution is something other than the totality of a human life and not all the deeds of an historical personage belong to history. I think that Voltaire's definition of history as "*le récit des faits donnés pour vrais*"¹¹—the account of facts given as true—is too wide, because many facts are true

¹⁰ R. Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* (Paris, 1898), I, p. 14.

¹¹ *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Paris, 1879), tome XIX, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, III, 346.

without being "historical," i.e. of historical interest. The historian must disregard them.

The fact that history as knowledge is something other than the totality of a human life becomes evident when we realize that the life of a man such as Plato lasted eighty years, while the history of his life—even a very detailed one—must be read within several hours or days. The historian detaches certain facts from their organic connections with other facts, isolates them and links together those isolated facts. The outcome is a fictitious construct, as it never existed nor could exist. With his rational, selective activity the political historian necessarily constructs an unreal, fictitious being, carrier of certain political ideas, the continuity of whose existence skips all the events of his non-political life, as if it had not existed. The political historian deals with his hero "as if" he had been exclusively an *homo politicus*. But such a being never existed and never could have existed, because man is, in the first place, a biological entity. Thus the historian's creature not only contradicts reality but is also self-contradictory, and I think that Vaihinger would have recognized such a being as a genuine fiction.

It must be noted that, several years before the publication of Vaihinger's *Philosophie des Als Ob* (in 1911), Georg Simmel discovered in the "as if," in fictitious constructs, one of the fundamental principles of historiography. According to him, historical Materialism only interprets events "as if" people were mainly actuated by economic motives. Thus, historical theories are not constitutive principles of history, but regulative principles in Kant's sense, or what the thinker of Königsberg called "*heuristische Fiktionen*."

The "ideal types" (*Idealtypen*) which, according to Max Weber, are used in historiography, are also definitely fictitious constructs, although Weber characterized them by the word "*utopian*." But all utopias are themselves fictions. The ideal type, says Weber, is not a representation of reality but rather its idealization, useful for research and for the communication of its results. One of the great advantages of these ideal types is that they allow much more precise definitions than the real phenomena. Weber insisted that concepts like "mercantilism," "individualism," "imperialism," "feudalism," etc., are not de-

scriptions of realities but ideal types. And he warned historians not to confuse ideal types with historical reality, insisting that they are only "means for the knowledge of connections important under individual points of view," expressing "the directing axiological ideas" (*die leitenden Wertideen*) of a given epoch.¹² But this is exactly what Kant called "*heuristische Fiktionen*."

THE APOLOGIA OF THE LIE

Is it not almost a miracle that by distorting reality we should be able to grasp it? In other words, that a systematic error should lead us to truth? Yet—first of all—Vaihinger never pretended that fictions lead us to a *right* idea of reality. All they do is to lead us to a "workable idea" of this reality, and this is not "truth" in an absolute sense. To be sure, there are fruitful errors (for instance, certain religions) and harmful truths (for instance, the dissolution of these religions), and the history of civilization can muster many impressive examples of both. Ibsen's "life-lie" (*Livsløgnen*) is a useful error, for, as the Norwegian fanatic of truth himself admits, it is the "stimulating principle" of millions of lives. But the unmasking of this useful psychological fiction in the interest of a moral ideal often reveals a harmful truth, harmful because it may destroy the life built on the life-lie.¹³

Vaihinger admits that by falsifying reality in order to get some satisfactory practical results, human thought gets often involved in new difficulties and logical conflicts. The principle of contradiction cannot be offended with impunity. Yet Vaihinger insists that every advance in history is purchased by some evil. Just as sin is very often the principle of *ethical* improvement, so contradiction is sometimes revealed as a principle of *logical* improvement. Luther's reformation brought about *ethical* conflicts, just as the invention of the differential calculus was possible only by establishing certain *logical* contradictions. Yet,

¹² M. Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen, 1922), pp. 190, 191, 208, 209, etc.

¹³ Cf. A. Stern, *Sartre—His Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1953), pp. 209, 210.

one can hardly deny that the Reformation brought about positive results for mankind's moral evolution, just as the differential calculus produced positive results in the history of the sciences.

To admit systematic error as a condition of workable truth seems to constitute in itself a kind of demoralization of logic. Yet, this demoralization does not take place as long as a fiction presents itself *openly* as being a falsification of reality and as long as every effort is made to eliminate it, after it has rendered its services. Vaihinger's fictions fulfill these requirements to a large extent. He considers fictions as a kind of lever. As soon as the work is done, we put the lever aside. As soon as their role is finished, the mechanical tools of thought must be removed. The elimination of the fictitious constructs as soon as they have served their purpose is the secret gesture leading to success. For being false ideas of reality fictitious constructs *must* be eliminated in time, just as a draftsman must erase the auxiliary lines from his drawings. One may call this procedure the "elimination of the lie." For fiction *is* a lie, although—in an "extra-moral" sense (*eine Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne*), to use a Nietzschean expression. The ancient definition *mendacium est falsiloquium in praejudicium alterius*—a lie is a false statement prejudicial to someone else—indicates clearly that fictions are not lies in a moral sense, since being openly admitted falsifications of reality they cannot mislead anybody. But when these fictions are taken for truths they can do much harm.

There are different ways of leading to this kind of dangerous confusion. There is a law of the preponderance of the means over the ends, according to which our mind easily loses sight of the original practical ends for which it has created a certain fictitious construct and takes it for an end in itself. This happened, for example, in the case of money, the fictitious character of which our time has a tendency to forget. Taking money for a true value it underrates the value of other economic factors, such as raw material and labor. This case may also be considered as an instance of Vaihinger's "law of ideational shift" (*Gesetz der Ideenverschiebung*), of which we shall talk later.

I think that another way leading to a confusion between fiction and truth is the presentation of fictions in the disguise of myths. In political history this has been done time and again by great demagogues. While a fiction is a methodical, conscious and *admitted* falsification of reality, an historical or social myth is a conscious but *unadmitted* falsification of reality—a falsification which tends to replace abstract concepts by personifications and recommends itself as truth to the belief of the crowds.¹⁴

This emotional belief of the crowds is the very source of the tremendous social dynamism implied in a lie, born from a conscious fiction but changed into a myth by the leaders of the crowds. Examples of this process were given earlier, in the cases mentioned by Titus Livius and recommended for imitation by Niccolò Machiavelli.

In our century this process of conscious transformation of ideologically intended myths was furthered by the theories of Georges Sorel and Vilfredo Pareto and by the practices of Mussolini and Hitler.

To Sorel myth is a fiction, i.e., a consciously false picture of some historical, social reality. But only the theorist and the leader realize the falseness of this picture. The crowds take the false idea for truth. And exactly because the myth does not describe reality as it is, Sorel considered it a means to push the crowds to actions which they would not undertake if they knew the true state of affairs. Probably Sorel remembered Nietzsche's admonition: "*Um zu handeln, musst du an Irrtümer glauben,*" (In order to act, you must believe in errors). Since Sorel passionately advocated violent actions of the crowds, he became a strong advocate of myth as a creative force in historical movement.

"Les hommes qui participent aux grands mouvements sociaux, se représentent leur action prochaine sous forme d'images de ba-

¹⁴ Cf. A. Stern, *La Filosofía de la Política y el Sentido de la Guerra actual* (México, 1943), p. 38.

taillés assurant le triomphe de leur cause,"¹⁵ Sorel wrote—people who take part in great social movements imagine their future action in the form of battle images which would guarantee the triumph of their cause. These battle images are the myths, which are completely irrational, full of illusions and totally indifferent toward social and historical realities. Sorel's myths are not "descriptions of things" but "*expressions de volonté,*" expressions of *will*. They have to inflame the passions of the crowds and put them into motion, that motion which Sorel's master Bergson had glorified as the basic dynamic principle of life and creative evolution. Therefore Sorel characterized his social myths also by designating them as "*images motrices*" and as "*moyens d'agir*"¹⁶—that is, as "motory images" and "means of action".

Being completely irrational, Sorel's myths totally escape intellectual criticism; they cannot be refuted by intellectual arguments. They should not be analyzed, Sorel believes; in fact, they are "*indécomposables en parties,*" and should be accepted "*en bloc* as historical forces;" or, in Bergsonian terms, they are grasped by "intuition" and not by "analysis." Be it the Christian myth of the struggle between Satan and Christ or the syndicalist myth of general strike—their truth-value is of no importance. All that counts for Sorel is that they succeed in preparing people for "*un combat pour détruire;*" for a battle in order to destroy. In short, the only thing which counts is that the myths "work." No wonder that Sorel also wrote a book in praise of William James' pragmatism.

Of course, the psychological presupposition of Sorel's theory of social, historical myth was that the actions of men, and especially of crowds, do not *require* logical motives. This presupposition of Sorel was strongly supported by his friend Vilfredo Pareto, who, in his monumental *Trattato di Sociologia Generale*, showed that most of men's actions are "*azioni non-logiche,*" non-logical actions. Their driving force is not reason but "*sentimenti, subcoscienza,*" etc. To be sure, according to Pareto "*gli uomini hanno tendenza spiccatissima a dare una*

¹⁵ G. Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence* (Paris, 1908), XXVI.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 123, 94.

vernice logica alle loro azioni"¹⁷—men have a very conspicuous tendency to paint a varnish of logic over their conduct. These rationalizations are always wrong, but—as Sorel's myths show—this fact does not prevent non-logically motivated actions from having the greatest dynamic effects. Again we are reminded of Nietzsche's admonition: "In order to act, you must believe in errors."

One knows Mussolini's *Autobiography*, written for the English-speaking readers at the suggestion of his staunch admirer, Richard Washburn Child, the United States Ambassador to Italy from 1921 to 1924, who, in his preface designated the Italian dictator as "both wise and humane."¹⁸ Among the other myths in this book is the one that Mussolini had been a student of Pareto at the University of Lausanne. This and other Mussolini-myths have been destroyed by Laura Fermi's recent, fascinating book, *Mussolini*.¹⁹ But this book leaves no doubt about the fact that Mussolini had studied Sorel's work (just as Nietzsche's) and that he even spoke of "*notre maître Sorel*." (Let us not forget that, for some time, Mussolini had been a professor of French.) No wonder that the Italian dictator's conception of myth was an exact repetition of Sorel's. In one of his speeches Mussolini declared: "*Noi abbiamo creato il nostro mito. Il mito è una fede, è una passione. Non è necessario che sia una realtà.*"²⁰—we have created our own myth. A myth is a faith, it is a passion. It is not necessary that it be a reality. The history of World War II and its end fully confirmed this conception of Mussolini's. His myth that Italy's destiny of glory and grandeur would find its fulfillment under the leadership of Fascism was revealed as totally lacking any relation to reality.

¹⁷ V. Pareto, *Trattato di Sociologia generale*, Vol. I, par. 154, 66.

¹⁸ B. Mussolini, *My Autobiography* (New York, 1928), XIX.

¹⁹ L. Fermi, *Mussolini* (The University of Chicago Press, 1961).

²⁰ B. Biancini, *Dizionario Mussoliniano* (Terza Edizione accresciuta, Milano, 1942), p. 158.

NAZISM—A NATIONAL PRAGMATISM

Much more realistic than its Italian counterpart, the myth of German National Socialism had a definitely pragmatic character. It tried to draw the utmost benefit from that demoralization of logic which was brought about by the pragmatic, utilitarian transvaluation of truth. In the German original of the *Philosophie des Als Ob*, which is more than twice as long as the English edition, Hans Vaihinger recognized the merits of "critical pragmatism" which he identified with C. S. Pierce and F. C. S. Schiller; but he definitely rejected the uncritical forms of this doctrine. I shall translate here the following paragraph, not contained in the English version of Vaihinger's great book:

The uncritical pragmatism...is an epistemological utilitarianism of the worst kind: what is useful to us, what helps us to endure life is true; consequently, the most superstitious dogmas are true, because they have proved their usefulness as supports of life. With this, philosophy becomes again an *ancilla theologiae* (a handmaid of theology); the relation is even worse: philosophy becomes outright a *meretrix theologorum* (a prostitute of the theologians).²¹

Although Vaihinger did not mention William James by name, it is obvious to me that the foregoing Philippic was aimed at him. For the definition of truth criticized by Vaihinger was exactly that of William James, who wrote, for example: "...an idea is 'true' so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives."²² Besides, the main preoccupation which motivated William James' adoption of pragmatism was theological. As he admitted himself, he wanted to preserve the religiosity of the "tender-minded," without giving up the interest in empirical facts of the "tough-minded." His two famous statements: "If theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true for pragmatism" and "if the hypothesis of God works satis-

²¹ H. Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*, XV.

²² W. James, *Pragmatism* (New York, 1910), p. 75.

factorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true"²³ is bad philosophy and bad theology, which was vigorously rejected by the Pope. Lord Bertrand Russell had not to use as much intellectual energy to refute William James' "proof" of the existence of God as Kant had to use in order to refute the proofs of Saint Anselmus and his successors. A joke was enough. For Russell simply wrote: "I have always found that the hypothesis of Santa Claus works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word; therefore 'Santa Claus exists' is true, although Santa Claus does not exist."²⁴ Yet Russell added the more serious argument that James' pragmatic conception of truth leads to a *regressus ad infinitum*; for to say that your belief as to consequences is true, is, according to James, to say that *it* has good consequences, and this in turn is only true if it has good consequences, etc. etc.

Vaihinger's own conception of truth was far removed from this pragmatic utilitarianism. "That idea is true," he wrote, "which fulfills best the purpose of all thought, namely to calculate and conceive the objective world."²⁵ Elsewhere he said: "There are ideas which, from a theoretical standpoint, are recognized as directly false, which are, however, justified and can be designated as 'practically true,' because they render us certain services."²¹ These definitions show that the concept of a non-instrumental, theoretical truth remained for Vaihinger at least a meaningful concept, while Pragmatism eliminated it totally. Furthermore, Vaihinger did everything to restore theoretical truth by eliminating in time the fictitious constructs he had to introduce for practical purposes. Since fictions contradict reality, since they are even self-contradictory and nevertheless succeed in dominating reality, the deviation from truth they bring about must *be corrected* in some way, and the contradictions must be made good. Therefore Vaihinger insisted that the fictitious construct must "drop out" ("*herausfallen*") in the final result. He also showed that in certain cases the error introduced by

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 73, 299.

²⁴ B. Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York, 1945), p. 818.

²⁵ H. Vaihinger, *op. cit.*, Kap. XX, p. 136.

the fictitious construct is cancelled by a systematic error of an opposite kind.

It is strange but true that Alfred Rosenberg, the official chief-mythologist of the Third Reich, author of the *Myth of the Twentieth Century*, did not get his inspiration from his compatriot Vaihinger, who had no part in Nazism, but from William James, John Dewey and F. C. S. Schiller, who were even farther removed from Hitlerism. While these Anglo-American thinkers reduced the truth of an idea to its usefulness and life-furthering function for mankind, Alfred Rosenberg went one step farther in reducing the truth of an idea to its usefulness and life-furthering function for the *German race*. In his infamous book he wrote: "Theory of knowledge, art, myth, ethics, religion—they are all at the service of so-called *organic* truth. This means that they serve the racially united German nation... And the decisive criterion of their truth is given by answering the question, whether they strengthen the form and intrinsic values of the German race, whether they develop them usefully, and whether or not they further the life of the German people."²⁶

In his book *Über die drei Arten rechtswissenschaftlichen Denkens* Dr. Carl Schmitt, a well-known German professor of legal philosophy and a prominent Nazi, wrote, in 1934: "In the future we shall no longer ask in Germany whether a theory is true, for the value of a scientific work will be determined only by its life-furthering function for the German race."

With this distorted development of pragmatism, philosophy has become something worse than Vaihinger had feared: a *meretrix politicorum*. For we have to realize that Rosenberg's degradation of truth to a tool of the maddest form of German nationalism and racialism was only a more restricted form of pragmatism, a *national* and *racial* pragmatism, while James', Dewey's and Schiller's was a *humanistic* pragmatism. Here and there truth was reduced to a tool, here and there the life-furthering functions or profitableness of ideas became criteria of their truth. Only that for James, Dewey and F. C. S. Schiller these life-furthering functions had to be those of mankind in

²⁶ A. Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts*, p. 669.

general (F. C. S. Schiller called his doctrine *Humanism*), while in the case of the Nazi-philosophers, the life-furthering functions were those of the German race. There is a great *moral* difference between these two points of view, but *epistemologically* they are of the same kind. Bertrand Russell was quite prophetic when he wrote, in 1907: "Pragmatist philosophy...although it begins with liberty and toleration, develops, by inherent necessity, into the appeal to force and the arbitrament of the big battalions. By this development it becomes equally adapted to democracy at home and to imperialism abroad."²⁷

I believe that the misuse of humanistic pragmatism by the Nazis uncovered an inner fallacy of pragmatic philosophy in general. It called our attention to the fact that mankind is not an undivided whole, but that it is strongly divided by interests. Profitableness, usefulness, satisfactoriness, etc., are value concepts and therefore correlative. When a frog eats a fly it is profitable and life-furthering for the frog, but not for the fly. When William James declares that the hypothesis of God is true because it "works satisfactorily," it is obvious that it works so for the New England aristocracy to which James belonged. It is not so evident that his concept of God worked so satisfactorily for the slaves, the serfs, the workers of the industrial revolution, etc., who were told, time and time again, that they should accept their miserable lives in order to gain eternal bliss in heaven. Thus they were robbed of their only certain possession: their earthly happiness.

In the national pragmatism of Hitler's Germany the ambivalent character of the pragmatic criterion of truth was demonstrated with unabashed frankness. Its myth worked very satisfactorily for the German people—at least during the years in which Europe was the almost undisputed looting-ground of the *Wehrmacht* and the SS. But it worked less satisfactorily for millions of other Europeans, to whom the German truth meant starvation and extermination.

When you begin to reduce truth to profitableness and usefulness, you do not know where the movement will end.

²⁷ B. Russell, *The Impact of Science on Society* (New York, 1953), p. 82.

IDEATIONAL SHIFT: WILHELM TELL—FACT AND FICTION

Earlier we mentioned Vaihinger's law of ideational shift, according to which the human mind, in quest for stability, tends to convert fictions into hypotheses and finally into dogmas. What originally was an "as if" gradually becomes a "when" and finally a "because." Fortunately, this historical process is counterbalanced by the critical movement of science and philosophy which, by their analyses, tend to restore the original state of affairs. Since the law of inertia not only governs the physical but also the psychic world, the human mind resists the critical, scientific counter-movement. Our mind tries to preserve its cherished dogmas, but gradually the doubt of the critic converts dogmas into hypotheses. Whenever the latter can no longer be maintained, then our mind either rejects the whole idea or conserves it as a symbolic fiction. The history of religions and sciences offers innumerable examples of these two evolutions. Let me only adduce one of them: the story of Wilhelm Tell.

When, in 1804, Friedrich Schiller wrote his drama *Wilhelm Tell*, this great writer, who, by the way, was also a professor of history, still believed in the historical character of his hero and of the events underlying his plot. His main sources were Aegidius Tschudi's (1505-1572) *Chronicon Helveticum* and *Die Geschichte Schweizerischer Eidgenossenschaft*, by Johannes von Mueller (1752-1809), considered as the highest authorities in Swiss history. But the new historical spirit and methods of the later nineteenth century showed that there existed not the slightest documentary proof of the existence of a Swiss citizen named Wilhelm Tell nor of a tyrannical Austrian governor of Schwyz and Uri called Hermann Gessler. There is likewise no documentary evidence that an "historical" crossbow shot was responsible for the liberation of Switzerland from Habsburg's greed. On the other hand, it was proved that stories similar to that of Wilhelm Tell existed among a dozen of other nations, even in India and Persia. It was found that in his *Historia Danorum Regum Heroumque* the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus had told the whole story of Wilhelm Tell nearly one hundred and fifty years before it "happened" in

Switzerland. Only in Denmark its hero was called Toko and the tyrant was the king himself. The latter ordered Toko to shoot an apple with one arrow from his own son's head, just as Tell was ordered to do by the governor Gessler. And just as Tell, Toko succeeded at the first shot, but only after having taken an additional arrow from his quiver. To the king's question for what purpose he had prepared the second arrow, Toko answered more or less with the words of Schiller's Tell: "*Mit diesem zweiten Pfeil durchschoss ich Euch, wenn ich mein liebes Kind getroffen hätte, und Eurer, wahrlich, hätt ich nicht gefehlt*"—with this second arrow I would have killed you if I had hit my dear child, and surely I would not have missed *you*. Finally, from an ambush, Toko mortally wounded the king with an arrow, just as Tell was to slay the tyrant Gessler. Since no trace of Wilhelm Tell could be found in history, Jacob Grimm derived his name from the Latin word *telum*, which means arrow and lightning-flash.

We can only surmise that, originally, the story of Wilhelm Tell was a poetic fiction, which, slowly, by the process of ideational shift, became an hypothesis, trying to explain the events leading to the foundation of the Swiss Confederation. Finally, this moving story, so flattering for Swiss national pride, was converted into an historical dogma.

Centuries later, thanks to historical criticism, the opposite process took place. Today the story of Tell is considered to be nothing but a beautiful poetical fiction, and is preserved and cherished as a symbol of national unity and freedom of the Swiss people. In Altdorf, in the Canton Uri, an imposing bronze statue of Wilhelm Tell can be seen today, showing the Swiss hero walking with his courageous little son Wälti, and proudly carrying his cross-bow, just as if he had really existed and truly liberated his country. And ninety-five out of a hundred visitors enthusiastically believe that he did, or wish to believe, and by their belief feel elated.

During World War II, when Switzerland was surrounded and threatened by a German Reich still more powerful and ruthless than that of the Habsburgs in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Wilhelm Tell became again a towering symbol of the nation's confidence in its survival in freedom, in

Notes and Discussion

the midst of deadly danger. His lack of historicity did not diminish Tell's inspiring force. It seems that for the history of a nation it is not so important what *has* happened as what people believe "as if" it had happened. In history, as in other realms, fictions are more than mere sham.