

Two topics have been central to historical theory since World War II: the issue of historical truth and that of narrative or of historical representation. In the 1950s and the 1960s debate concentrated on the epistemological status of statements about the past and on the problem of historical explanation. The “covering law model,” Collingwoodian hermeneutics, intentional or teleological explanation, the logical connection argument, and constructivism as defined by Oakeshott, Meiland, and Goldstein have been the rich harvest of this stage in the history of historical theory. But in the 1970s many theorists felt that all these discussions failed to take into account the fact that historical knowledge is expressed by texts rather than by individual statements or explanations. So in order to compensate for this lacuna, historical theorists started to investigate the historical text.

Two comments are due here. In the first place, theorists interested in the historical text were often called (and often called themselves) “narrativists.” Even though it is undeniably true that most of historical writing has the character of being a narrative, this has caused a great deal of unnecessary confusion. The term *narrativism* suggested that the historical text is, essentially, a narrative, or a story as we may find it in novels, legends, or fairy tales. Many historians therefore distrusted narrativism from the start. They rightly pointed out that one cannot reduce the writing of history to mere storytelling. Moreover, they insisted that the historian’s text is required to do justice to what the text is about and that this has no equivalent in novels, fiction, and so on. And their worries were all the more justified since several historical theorists allowed themselves as well to be misled by the term *narrativism* and to see historical writing as being merely a variant of the novel. They inferred from this the mistaken view that the primary theory, that is, the discipline that had been developed for analyzing

something present again which is not present now (for whatever reason). So the term *historical representation* will never invite us to forget that a historian's text is a text about a past and that it should do justice to that past as well as it can. And this may also contribute to reducing the most unfortunate gap that has recently come into being between historical theory on the one hand and historians themselves on the other. Historical theory is in a sad state if the only dialogues it is capable of with the practitioners of the discipline itself are *dialogues des sourds*.

In the second place, the theories developed for understanding the nature of historical representation (or narrative) are a *supplement* to what was said in the 1950s and 1960s about the truth of statements about the past, about causal explanation and not a *replacement* of it. Theories of historical representation are, essentially, theories about how the whole of a historical text is related to the past that it is a representation of—and this is a problem that cannot be reduced to how a historical text's individual statements relate to the past. So there is no obvious and necessary link between theories of historical representation on the one hand and theories about the truth of statements or explanation on the other. To put it provocatively—but precisely because of this with the clarity that is needed here—one can quite well be (and I happen to be myself) an adherent of positivist or empiricist accounts of historical writing for what takes place in the historical text on the level of the individual statement while being, at the same time, an adherent of a theory of historical representation for the text as a whole.

But when taken together, the kind of theories developed in the 1950s and 1960s and theories of historical representation make up all of what we call historical writing. There is no aspect of what historians do when accounting for the past as we expect them to do that could not be reduced in one way or another to the kind of problems addressed in these two variants of historical theory.

Nevertheless, one aspect of how we relate to the past escapes the intellectual matrix of historical truth and representation. This is the

Tacitus, and down to Machiavelli have argued? Can it contribute to an understanding of our collective identity, as had been argued by historians since Ranke? But there is also a more impractical and speculative way of looking at historical consciousness. Here the crucial question is, *Why should we be aware of there having been a past at all?* How and why does historical consciousness originate? Why should we not rather be like Nietzsche's herd, quietly moving around its meadow in a timeless present, "tightly bound to its present likes and dislikes, that is to say, to the stake of the moment," whom we will always ask in vain for the cause of its mindless stupidity since it immediately forgets again how it wanted to answer our very weird questions.

Again, two ways of dealing with this question will suggest themselves. One may take one's lead in the very notion of historical consciousness itself and ask oneself what state of mind we must be in, what the nature of our consciousness must be, if we are to consider the reflection about our collective past to be an urgent necessity. In short, the question will be: *What will or must it mean to us to have an awareness of the past?* But there is an alternative route to the issue of historical consciousness as well. Here we should ask ourselves, *What makes us aware of the past at all,* what should happen, or what must have happened to a nation or a collectivity to become fascinated by the problem of its past? This is the approach that should be adopted in the present study. And I shall try to answer the question of how and why we may become fascinated by our collective past in terms of the notion of "sublime historical experience." For a nation, a collectivity, a culture, or a civilization that has had such a sublime historical experience, the past and an awareness of this past will become ineluctable realities. The past will then be for them no less a part of what they are as our limbs are a part of our bodies—and forgetting the past would then be an intellectual amputation.

Once again, this is a supremely impractical problem: It has nothing to do with anything whatsoever on what historians actually do and on the question of

of the actual practice of science or of history. We would then automatically exclude from philosophical scrutiny those aspects of science and history that are compatible with any actual or imaginable way of doing science or history. And that there should be no such aspects to science or history is a mere dogma until independent proof has been given of its truth. The longer as long as no such a priori proof has been given, there is room for a better one. Finally, this also has its implications for this book's preface. This book is not an endeavor to identify the cognitive instruments necessary for the acquisition of historical knowledge. It is not a blueprint for historical writing. It is rather like a painting that some may like and some may not. Most readers of this book will have an intuition of what the nature of history is and what we have it for. Some readers (as I hope) will conclude that this book has helped to deepen their intuitions, whereas others—for reasons that are easy enough to predict—will consider the book useless, “hyperbolic,” or simply nonsensical. And I am content with that, for I am not trying to convince anybody of anything in this book. In this way it resembles Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*; it also is “ein Buch für Alle und Keine,” a book for all and none.

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