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HISTORIOGRAPHY AND POSTMODERNISM

F. R. ANKERSMIT

My point of departure in this article is the present-day overproduction in our discipline. We are all familiar with the fact that in any imaginable area of historiography, within any specialty, an overwhelming number of books and articles is produced annually, making a comprehensive view of them all impossible. This is true even of the separate topics within one and the same specialty. Let me illustrate this with an example from political theory, a field with which I am fairly familiar. Anyone who some twenty years ago wanted to go into Hobbes's political philosophy needed only two important commentaries on Hobbes: the studies written by Watkins and Warrender. Of course, there were more even then but after reading these two books one was pretty well "in the picture." However, anyone who in 1989 has the courage to try to say anything significant about Hobbes will first have to read his way through a pile of twenty to twenty-five studies which are as carefully written as they are extensive; I will spare you an enumeration of them. Moreover, these studies are usually of such high quality that one certainly cannot afford to leave them unread.

There are two aspects to the unintended result of this overproduction. In the first place, the discussion of Hobbes tends to take on the nature of a discussion of the *interpretation* of Hobbes, rather than of his work *itself*. The work itself sometimes seems to be little more than the almost forgotten reason for the war of interpretations going on today. In the second place, because of its evident multi-interpretability, Hobbes's original text gradually lost its capacity to function as arbiter in the historical debate. Owing to all the interpretations, the text *itself* became vague, a watercolor in which the lines flow into one another. This meant that the naive faith in the text itself being able to offer a solution to our interpretation problems became just as absurd as the faith in a signpost attached to a weathervane. The paradoxical result of all this is that the text itself no longer has any authority in an interpretation and that we even feel compelled to advise our students not to read *Leviathan* independently; they are better off first trying to hack a path through the jungle of interpretation. To put it in a nutshell, we no longer have any texts, any past, but just interpretations of them.

When I read the reviews and notices announcing new books in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *New York Review of Books*, or in the professional journals which are increasing in number at an alarming rate, I do not doubt that things are very much the same in other areas of historiography. The situation

which Nietzsche feared more than a hundred years ago, the situation in which historiography itself impedes our view of the past, seems to have become reality. Not only does this flood of historical literature give us all a feeling of intense despondency, but this overproduction undeniably has something uncivilized about it. We associate civilization with, among other things, a feeling for moderation, for a happy medium between excess and shortage. Any feeling for moderation, however, seems to have been lost in our present-day intellectual alcoholism. This comparison with alcoholism is also very apt because the most recent book or article on a particular topic always pretends to be the very last intellectual drink.

Of course, this situation is not new and there has therefore been no lack of attempts to retain some reassuring prospects for the future for disheartened historians. The Dutch historian Romein saw in this overproduction a tendency towards specialization; he therefore called for a theoretical history which would undo the pulverization of our grasp of the past which had been caused by specialization. Theoretical history would be able to lift us to a more elevated viewpoint from which we would again be able to survey and to bring order to the chaos caused by specialization and overproduction.¹ But Romein's book on the watershed of two ages is proof that this is easier said than done. Above all, the problem seems to be that on this higher level postulated by Romein a real interaction among the various specialties remains difficult to realize. Integral historiography leads to enumeration rather than to integration.

Another way out of the dilemma is the strategy adopted by the *Annales* school. They have devoted their attention chiefly to the discovery of new objects of inquiry in the past; with this strategy they do indeed allow themselves the chance of once again finding history in an unspoiled state. Of course, this offers only temporary solace: before too long, countless other historians, French or not, will pounce upon these new topics and soon they too will be covered by a thick and opaque crust of interpretations. There is, however, more to be said about how resourceful the *Annales* school is in finding new and exciting topics. In the course of this article I shall return to this matter.

The crucial question now is what attitude we should take with regard to this overproduction of historical literature which is spreading like a cancer in all fields. A reactionary longing for the neat historical world of fifty years ago is just as pointless as despondent resignation. We have to realize that there is no way back. It has been calculated that at this moment there are more historians occupied with the past than the total number of historians from Herodotus up until 1960. It goes without saying that it is impossible to forbid the production of new books and articles by all these scholars presently writing. Complaining about the loss of a direct link with the past does not get us any further. However, what *does* help and *does* have a point is the defining of a new and different link with the past based on a complete and honest recognition of the position in which we now see ourselves placed as historians.

1. J. Romein, "Het vergruisde beeld," and "Theoretische geschiedenis," in *Historische Lijnen en Patronen* (Amsterdam, 1971).

There is, moreover, another reason to make an attempt in that direction. The present-day overproduction of historical literature can indeed be called monstrous if our point of departure is *traditional* ideas about the task and the meaning of historiography. Historiography today has burst out of its traditional, self-legitimizing, theoretical jacket and is therefore in need of new clothes. This is not in order to teach the historian how he should set about his work as an historian, nor to develop a theory *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*. With regard to the first half of this statement, there is no point outside historiography itself from which rules for the historian's method of work can be drawn up: if historians consider something to be meaningful, then it is meaningful and that is all there is to it. As for the second half of the statement, I do not believe that historiography is useful or has a recognizable disadvantage. By this I do not mean that historiography is useless, but that the question concerning the usefulness and disadvantage of historiography is an unsuitable question — a “category mistake,” to use Ryle's expression. Along with poetry, literature, painting, and the like, history and historical consciousness belong to culture, and no questions can meaningfully be asked about the usefulness of culture. Culture, of which historiography is a part, is rather the background *from which* or *against which* we can form our opinion concerning the usefulness of, for example, certain kinds of scientific research or certain political objectives. For that reason science and politics do not belong to culture; if something can have a use or a disadvantage or enables us to manipulate the world it is not a part of civilization. Culture and history define use, but cannot themselves be defined in terms of usefulness. They belong to the domain of the “absolute presuppositions,”² to use Collingwood's terminology. This is also the reason that politics should not interfere with culture.

That is why, if we were to try to find a new jacket for historiography, as was considered necessary above, the most important problem would be to situate historiography within present-day civilization as a whole. This problem is of a cultural-historical or an interpretative nature, and could be compared with the sort of problem which we sometimes pose ourselves when we are considering the place and the meaning of a particular event within the totality of our life-history. In general, it is strange that historians and philosophers of history have paid so little attention over the last forty years to parallels between the development of present-day historiography on the one hand and that of literature, literary criticism, printing — in short, civilization — on the other. Apparently, the historian did not see any more reason to suspect the existence of such parallels than did the chemist or the astronomer.

It is not my goal to determine here the place of historiography in this way. Instead, I will move further away to ascertain whether the overproduction in historiography has its counterpart in a considerable part of present-day civilization and society. Who does not know the cliché that we are living in an age of an informa-

2. R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford, 1940).

tion surplus? In the course of all this theorizing about information – which is more profound at some times than at others – two things stand out which are of importance for the rest of my article. In the first place, it is strange that one often talks about information as if it is something almost physical. Information “flows,” “moves,” “spreads,” “is traded,” “is stored,” or “is organized.” Lyotard speaks of the State as a body which restrains or disperses information flows.³ Information appears to be a sort of liquid with a low viscosity; we are flooded by it and are in imminent danger of drowning in it. Second, when we talk about information, information as such has assumed a conspicuously prominent place with respect to the actual subject matter of that information. This relationship was usually the other way around. Take a statement giving information such as “In 1984 Ronald Reagan was elected President of the US.” This informative statement itself is hidden by the state of affairs described by it. However, within our present-day way of speaking about information, the reality which that information concerns tends to be relegated to the background. The reality is the information itself and no longer the reality behind that information. This gives information an autonomy of its own, a substantiality of its own. Just as there are laws describing the behavior of things in reality, there would also seem to be a scientific system possible to describe the behavior of that remarkable liquid we call information. Incidentally, I would like to add at this point that, from the perspective of Austin’s speech act theory, information could just as well be said to be purely performative as not at all performative. This is certainly one of the fascinating aspects of the phenomenon of information.⁴

In recent years, many people have observed our changed attitude towards the phenomenon of information. Theories have been formed about it and the theoreticians concerned have, as usually happens, given themselves a name. In this context we often talk about postmodernists or poststructuralists and they are, understandably, contrasted with the modernists or structuralists from the recent past. In 1984, a very interesting conference in Utrecht was devoted to postmodernism, and anyone who heard the lectures read at the conference will agree that it is not easy to define the concepts postmodernism or poststructuralism satisfactorily.⁵ Nevertheless, it is possible to discern a general line, as did Jonathan Culler in a recent book.⁶ Science was the alpha and omega of the modernists and the structuralists; they saw science as not only the most important given but at the same time the ultimate given of modernity. Scientific rationality as such does not pose a problem for postmodernists and poststructuralists; they look at it, as it were, from outside or from above. They neither criticize nor reject

3. J. F. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne* (Paris, 1979), 15.

4. Information is performative, has purely “illocutionary” and “perlocutionary” force, because the constatory element has been lost; information is not performative, because it is subject to its own laws and not to those of interhuman communication – communication is only a part of the life of information.

5. W. van Reijen, “Postscriptum,” in *Modernen versus Postmodernen*, ed. W. Hudson and W. van Reijen (Utrecht, 1986), 9–51; W. Hudson, “The Question of Postmodern Philosophy?,” *ibid.*, 51–91.

6. J. Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London, 1985), 18ff.

science; they are not irrationalists, but they show the same aloofness with respect to science as we observed above in our present attitude towards information. This is not a question of metacriticism of scientific research or scientific method as we are used to in philosophy of science. Philosophy of science remains inherent in the scientism of the modernists; philosophers of science follow the line of thought of scientists and study the path they have covered between the discovery of empirical data and theory. For postmodernists, both the philosophy of science and science itself form the given, the point of departure for their reflections. And postmodernists are just as little interested in the sociological question of how research scientists react to one another or what the relation is between science and society. The postmodernist's attention is focused neither on scientific research nor on the way in which society digests the results of scientific research, but only on the functioning of science and of scientific information itself.

For postmodernism, science and information are independent objects of study which obey their own laws. The first principal law of postmodernist information theory is the law that information multiplies. One of the most fundamental characteristics of information is that really important information is never the end of an information genealogy, but that its importance is in fact assessed by the intellectual posterity it gives rise to. Historiography itself forms an excellent illustration of this. The great works from the history of historiography, those of a de Tocqueville, Marx, Burckhardt, Weber, Huizinga, or Braudel, proved repeatedly to be the most powerful stimulants for a new wave of publications, instead of concluding an information genealogy as if a particular problem had then been solved once and for all: "Paradoxically, the more powerful and authoritative an interpretation, the more writing it generates."⁷ In the modernist view, the way in which precisely interesting information generates more information is, of course, incomprehensible. For modernists, meaningful information is information which does put an end to writing; they cannot explain why precisely what is debatable is fundamental to the progress of science, why, as Bachelard said, it is the *debatable* facts which are the *true* facts.

It is important within the framework of this article to look in greater detail at this postmodernism which is ascientistic rather than antiscentistic. In the first place, it can teach us what we should understand by a postmodernist historiography and, in the second place, that historiography, remarkably enough, has always had already something postmodernist about it. A good example of a postmodernist criterion of science is Nietzsche's "deconstruction" — to use the right term — of causality, which many consider to be one of the most important pillars of scientific thought. In causalistic terminology, the cause is the source and the effect the secondary given. Nietzsche then points out that only on the basis of our observation of the effect are we led to look for the causes and that therefore the effect is *in fact* the primary given and the cause the secondary given. "If the effect is what causes the cause to become a cause, then the effect, not the cause, should

7. *Ibid.*, 90.

be treated as the origin.”⁸ Anyone who puts forward the objection that Nietzsche has confused the order of things in research and reality respectively is missing the point of Nietzsche’s line of thought; for the point is precisely the artificiality of the traditional hierarchy of cause and effect. Our scientific training has, so to speak, “stabilized” us to adhere to this traditional hierarchy, but beyond this intellectual training there is nothing that forces us to continue to do so. Just as much, albeit not *more*, can be said in favor of reversing this hierarchy.

This is the way things always are in postmodernism. Science is “destabilized,” is placed outside its own center, the reversibility of patterns of thought and categories of thought is emphasized, without suggesting any definite alternative. It is a sort of disloyal criticism of science, a blow below the belt which is perhaps not fair, but which for that very reason does hit science where it hurts most. Scientific rationality is not *aufgehoben* in an Hegelian way to something else, nor is it true to say that every view automatically evokes its antithesis; it is rather the recognition that every view has, besides its scientifically approved inside, an outside not noticed by science. In his *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein had already suggested something similar with respect to every valid line of reasoning. It is in fact the valid line of reasoning which aims at making itself superfluous, which therefore is always a journey over the territory of the untrue—that is, the journey from initial misconception to correct insight. Consequently, what is true always remains tainted by what is untrue.

Both a logical and an ontological conclusion can be attached to this insight; together they give an idea of the revolutionary nature of postmodernism. Let us first look at logic. For the postmodernist, the scientific certainties on which the modernists have always built are all as many variants on the paradox of the liar. That is, the paradox of the Cretan who says that all Cretans lie; or, to put it more compactly, the paradox of the statement “this statement is untrue,” where this statement is a statement about itself. Of course, all the drama of postmodernism is contained in the insight that these paradoxes should be seen as unsolvable. And here we should bear in mind that the solution to the paradox of the liar which Russell, with his theory of types and his distinction between predicates and predicates of predicates, proposed in the *Principia Mathematica*, is still recognized today as one of the most important foundations of contemporary logic.⁹ The postmodernist’s aim, therefore, is to pull the carpet out from under the feet of science and modernism. Here, too, the best illustration of the postmodernist thesis is actually provided by historiography. Historical interpretations of the past first become recognizable, they first acquire their identity, through the contrast with *other* interpretations; they are what they are only on the basis of what they are *not*. Anyone who knows only one interpretation of, for example, the Cold War, does not know any interpretation at all of that phenomenon. Every

8. *Ibid.*, 88.

9. J. van Heijenoort, “Logical Paradoxes,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. P. Edwards (London, 1967), 45–51.

historical insight, therefore, intrinsically has a paradoxical nature.¹⁰ No doubt Hayden White in his *Metahistory* — the most revolutionary book in philosophy of history over the past twenty-five years — was thinking along the same lines when he characterized all historiography as fundamentally ironic.¹¹

Let us now turn to ontology. In his deconstruction of the traditional hierarchy of cause and effect, Nietzsche was playing off our way of speaking about reality against processes in reality itself. The current distinction between language and reality thus loses its *raison d'être*. In particular, scientific language is no longer a “mirror of nature” but just as much a part of the inventory of reality as the objects in reality which science studies. Language as used in science is a thing,¹² and as Hans Bertens argued at the Utrecht Conference on postmodernism,¹³ things in reality acquire a “language-like” nature. Once again, historiography provides the best illustration for all this. As we will see presently, it is historical language which has the same opacity as we associate with things in reality. Furthermore, both Hayden White and Ricoeur (whom I certainly do not mean to call a post-modernist) like to say that past reality should be seen as a text formulated in a foreign language with the same lexical, grammatical, syntactical, and semantic dimensions as any other text.¹⁴ It is equally characteristic that historians in their theoretical reflections often show a marked tendency to speak about historical language as if it were part of reality itself and vice versa. Thus, Marx spoke of the *contradiction* between the production forces and production relations as if he were discussing *statements* about reality instead of *aspects* of this reality. Similarly, historians very often would like to see the same uniqueness realized for historical language as is characteristic of historical phenomena.¹⁵ In short, the latent and often subconscious resistance to the language/reality dichotomy which historians have always displayed in fact had its origin in the unconsidered but nevertheless correct insight of historians into the fundamentally postmodernist nature of their discipline.

When the dichotomy between language and reality is under attack we are not far from aestheticism. Does not both the language of the novelist and of the historian give us the illusion of a reality, either fictitious or genuine? More important still, Gombrich has in various works taught us that the work of art, that

10. F. R. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (The Hague, 1983), 239, 240.

11. H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), 37.

12. F. R. Ankersmit, “The Use of Language in the Writing of History,” in *Working with Language*, ed. H. Coleman (forthcoming in 1989 from Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin).

13. H. Bertens, “Het ‘Talige’ Karakter van de Postmoderne Werkelijkheid,” in *Modernen versus postmodernen*, 135–153. Bertens's position is actually still modernist: his thesis that language can never represent the fullness of reality makes him choose a position *within* the polarity of language and reality, instead of outside it as would be required by the postmodernists.

14. White, *Metahistory*, 30; P. Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,” in *Interpretative Social Science*, ed. P. Rabinow and W. M. Sullivan (London, 1979), 73.

15. Von der Dunk, *De Organisatie van het Verleden* (Bussum, 1982); see for example 169, 170, 344, 362, 369.

is to say, the language of the artist, is not a *mimetic reproduction* of reality but a *replacement* or *substitute* for it.¹⁶ Language and art are not situated *opposite* reality but are themselves a pseudo-reality and are therefore situated *within* reality. As a matter of fact, Megill in his brilliant genealogy of postmodernism has shown to what extent postmodernists from Nietzsche up to and including Derrida want to extend aestheticism over the entire domain of the representation of reality.¹⁷

This aestheticism is also in harmony with recently acquired insights into the nature of historiography—that is, the recognition of the stylistic dimension of historical writing. To the modernists, style was anathema or, at best, irrelevant. I quote from a recent lecture by C. P. Bertels: “fine writing, the display of literary style, does not add an iota of truth to historical research nor to any other scientific research.”¹⁸ What is important is the content; the way, the style in which it is expressed, is irrelevant. However, since Quine and Goodman, this pleasant distinction between form or style and content can no longer be taken for granted. Their argument can be summarized as follows. If various historians are occupied with various aspects of the same research subject, the resulting difference in *content* can just as well be described as a different *style* in the treatment of that research subject. “*What* is said . . . may be a way of talking about something else; for example, writing about Renaissance battles and writing about Renaissance arts, are different ways of writing about the Renaissance.”¹⁹ Or, in the words of Gay, “manner,” style, implies at the same time a decision with regard to “matter,” to content.²⁰ And where style and content might be distinguished from one another, we can even attribute to style priority over content; for because of the incommensurability of historiographical views—that is to say, the fact that the nature of historical differences of opinion cannot be satisfactorily defined in terms of research subjects—there remains nothing for us but to concentrate on the style embodied in every historical view or way of looking at the past, if we are to guarantee the meaningful progress of historical debate. Style, not content, is the issue in such debates. Content is a derivative of style.

The postmodernist recognition of the aesthetic nature of historiography can be described more precisely as follows. In analytical philosophy, there is the phenomenon of the so-called “intensional context.” An example is the statement “John believes that p” or “John hopes that p” (where p stands for a particular statement). The point is that in an intensional context like this, p can never be replaced by another statement even if this other statement is equivalent to p, or results directly from it. After all, we do not know whether John is in fact aware

16. E. H. Gombrich, “Meditations on a Hobby Horse, or the Roots of Artistic Form,” in *Aesthetics Today*, ed. P. J. Gudel (New York, 1980).

17. A. Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley, 1985); see in particular 2–20.

18. C. P. Bertels, “Stijl: Een Verkeerde Categorie in de Geschiedwetenschap,” in *Groniek* 89/90 (1984), 150.

19. N. Goodman, “The Status of Style,” in N. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hassocks, 1978), 26.

20. P. Gay, *Style in History* (London, 1974), 3.

of the consequences of his belief or hope that *p*. It is possible that John believes that the water is boiling, to give an example, without his believing that the temperature of the water is a hundred degrees Centigrade. In other words, the exact form in which a statement in an intensional context was formulated is one of the prerequisites for the truth of this statement. The sentence attracts, so to speak, attention to itself. Thus, the *form* of the statement is certainly just as important here as the *content*. In a particularly interesting book, Danto has pointed out that this intensional nature of statements and texts (or at least some of them) is nowhere clearer than in literature: "we may see this [this intensional element] perhaps nowhere more clearly than in those literary texts, where in addition to whatever facts the author means to state, he or she *chooses the words* with which they are stated" and the literary intention of the writer "would fail if other words were used instead."²¹ Because of its intensional nature, the literary text has a certain opacity, a capacity to attract attention to itself, instead of drawing attention to a fictitious or historical reality behind the text. And this is a feature which the literary text shares with historiography; for the nature of the view of the past presented in an historical work is defined exactly by the language used by the historian in his or her historical work. Because of the relation between the historiographical view and the language used by the historian in order to express this view—a relation which nowhere intersects the domain of the past—historiography possesses the same opacity and intensional dimension as art.

Art and historiography can therefore be contrasted with science. Scientific language at least has the pretension of being transparent; if it impedes our view of reality, it will have to be refined or elucidated. It is true that some philosophers of science, such as Mary Hesse, want to attribute even to science the abovementioned aesthetic and literary dimensions. That would, of course, lend some extra plausibility to my claim regarding historiography, but I see the differences between the exact sciences and historiography as *more* than a question of nuances. Where the insight provided in a discipline is far more of a syntactical than of a semantic nature—as is the case in the exact sciences—there is comparatively less room for intensional contexts. After all, only from the perspective of semantics is it meaningful to ask the question whether there is synonymy or not (and that is the most important issue in intensional contexts).

If we are in agreement with the above, that is to say, with the applicability of postmodernist insight to historiography, I would like to draw a number of conclusions before rounding off this article. For the modernist, within the scientific world-picture, within the view of history we all initially accept, evidence is in essence the evidence that something happened in the past. The modernist historian follows a line of reasoning from his sources and evidence to an historical reality hidden behind the sources. On the other hand, in the postmodernist view, evidence does not point towards the *past* but to other *interpretations* of the past;

21. A. C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 188.

for that is what we in fact use evidence for. To express this by means of imagery: for the modernist, the evidence is a tile which he picks up to see what is underneath it; for the postmodernist, on the other hand, it is a tile which he steps on in order to move on to other tiles: horizontality instead of verticality.

This is not only an insight into what actually happens but just as much an insight into what historians should concentrate on in the future. The suggestion could best be described as the contemporization of the historical source. Evidence is not a magnifying glass through which we can study the past, but bears more resemblance to the brushstrokes used by the painter to achieve a certain effect. Evidence does not send us back to the past, but gives rise to the question what an historian here and now can or cannot do with it. Georges Duby illustrates this new attitude towards evidence. When his intelligent interviewer Guy Lardreau asks him what constitutes for him, Duby, the most interesting evidence, he says that this can be found in what is not said, in what a period has *not* said about itself, and he therefore compares his historical work with the developing of a negative.²² Just as the fish does not know that it is swimming in the water, what is most characteristic of a period, most omnipresent in a period, is unknown to the period itself. It is not revealed until a period has come to an end. The fragrance of a period can only be inhaled in a subsequent period. Of course, Hegel and Foucault have already made many interesting comments about this. However, the point here is Duby's observation that the essence of a period is determined by the *destinataire*, to use the term of the French postmodernists, by the historian who has to develop here and now his negative of a period from that which was not said or was only whispered, or was expressed only in insignificant details. The historian is like the connoisseur who recognizes the artist not by that which is characteristic of him (and consequently imitable) but by that which, so to speak, spontaneously "escaped" him. "Le style, c'est l'homme" and our style is where we are ourselves without having thought about ourselves. That is why so few people still have style in our narcissistic era. In short, the way of dealing with the evidence as suggested by Duby is special because it points not so much to something that was concealed behind it in the past, but because it acquires its point and meaning only through the confrontation with the mentality of the later period in which the historian lives and writes. The mentality of a period is revealed only in the difference between it and that of a later period; the direction in which the evidence points thus undergoes a shift of ninety degrees. As has so often been the case, this, too, had been anticipated by Huizinga. Writing about the historical sensation, he says: "this contact with the past, which is accompanied by the complete conviction of genuineness, truth, can be evoked by a line from a charter or a chronicle, by a print, a few notes from an old song. It is not an element introduced into his work by the writer [in the past] by means

22. G. Duby and G. Lardreau, *Geschichte und Geschichtswissenschaft: Dialoge* (Frankfurt am Main, 1982), 97, 98.

of certain words. . . . *The reader brings it to meet the writer*, it is his response to the latter's call."²³

It is not surprising that Duby and Lardreau point out in this connection the relation between historiography and psychoanalysis.²⁴ In both historiography and psychoanalysis, we are concerned with interpretation in the most fundamental sense of the word. In historiography, this way of dealing with traces of the past as suggested by Duby compels us to refrain from searching for some initially invisible machine in the past itself which has caused these traces discernible on the surface. In the same way, psychoanalysis, in spite of the positivist notes struck by Freud himself, is in fact a repertory of interpretation strategies. Psychoanalysis teaches us to understand what the neurotic *says* and does not draw our attention to the causal effects of a number of elementary and undivided homunculi in his mind.²⁵ Both the psychoanalyst and the historian try to project a pattern *onto* the traces and do not search for something *behind* the traces. In both cases, the activity of interpretation is understood strictly nominalistically: there is nothing in historical reality or in the mind of the neurotic that corresponds with the content of interpretations.²⁶

However, there is a still more interesting parallel to psychoanalytic interpretation. Of course, Duby's thesis that the historian should pay attention to what is not said and to what is suppressed — madness, untruth, and taboo, to use Foucault's criteria — is obviously related to the analyst's method of work. Just as we are what we are not, or do not want to be, in a certain sense the past is also what it was not. In both psychoanalysis and history, what is suppressed manifests itself only in minor and seemingly irrelevant details. In psychoanalysis, this results in the insight that man does not have an easily observable being or essence on the basis of which he can be understood, but that the secret of personality lies in what only rarely and fleetingly becomes visible behind the usual presentation. Our personality is, as Rorty put it, a collage rather than a substance: "the ability to think of ourselves as idiosyncratically formed collages rather than as substances has been an important factor in our ability to slough off the idea that we have a true self, one shared with all other humans. . . . Freud made the paradigm

23. J. Huizinga, "De Taak der Cultuurgeschiedenis," in *J. Huizinga: Verzamelde Werken 7* (Haarlem, 1950), 71, 72; italics mine.

24. Duby and Lardreau, 98ff.

25. This is the *Leitmotif* in D. P. Spence, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1982).

26. Lardreau expressed this for historiography as follows: "Somit gibt es nichts als Diskurse über eine Vergangenheit, die wiederum aus nichts anderem als aus diesen Diskursen besteht, in denen jeweils gegenwärtigen Interessen mobilisiert werden. Ein präzisiertes Ballett von masken, die die Interessen und Konflikte der Gegenwart darstellen, mit wechselnden Rollen, aber gleichbleibenden Standorten — die Geschichte als Kleiderkammer imaginärer Inskriptionen, der Historiker als Kostümbildner, der Verkleidungen arrangiert, die nie neu gewesen sind: die Geschichte ist aus dem Stoff unserer Träume gewebt, unser Kurzes Gedächtnis von einem Schlummer umhüllt." Lardreau is speaking explicitly of nominalism in this context. See Duby and Lardreau, 10.

of self-knowledge the discovery of little idiosyncratic accidents rather than of an essence."²⁷

This is also the case in historiography, at least in what I would like to call post-modernist history (of mentalities). To formulate this in the paradoxical manner so popular among postmodernists: the essence of the past is not, or does not lie in, the essence of the past. It is the scraps, the slips of the tongue, the *Fehlleistungen* of the past, the rare moments when the past "let itself go," where we discover what is really of importance for us. I suspect that at least a partial explanation can be found here for what Jörn Rüsen referred to as the "paradigm change" in present-day historiography, a paradigm change which in his opinion consists mainly of exchanging *makrohistorische Strukturen* for *mikrohistorische Situationen und Lebensverhältnisse* as the object of the historian's attention.²⁸ What we are witnessing could perhaps be nothing less than the definitive farewell for the time being to all the essentialist aspirations which have actually dominated historiography as long as it has existed. Historians have always been searching for something they could label as the essence of the past – the principle that held everything together in the past (or in a part of it) and on the basis of which, consequently, everything could be understood. In the course of the centuries, this essentialism in historiography has manifested itself in countless different ways. Of course, essentialism was conspicuously present in the various speculative systems which have directed the thinking of Western man about his past. The Augustinian theological concept of history and its secularized variants,²⁹ the idea of progress, with its blind faith in the progress of science and the social blessings it was expected to bring, were always the "metanarratives," to use Lyotard's term, by means of which not only historiography but also other fundamental aspects of civilization and society were legitimated.³⁰

Then came historicism which, with a strange naiveté,³¹ saw the essence of the past as embodied in a curious mixture of fact and idea. The epistemological naiveté of the historicist doctrine of historical ideas was only possible in a time when the belief and faith in the perceptibility of the essence of the past were so easily taken for granted that nobody had an inkling of his own ontological arrogance. The social history discussed by Rüsen was the last link in this chain of essentialist views of history. The triumphant note with which social history made its entry, particularly in Germany, is the most striking proof of the optimistic self-overestimation on the part of these historians, who feel they have now found the long sought-after key which will open all historical doors. Anyone who is aware of the essentialist nature of this social history and of the traditional enmity between essentialism and science cannot fail to notice the ludicrous nature

27. R. Rorty, "Freud and Moral Reflection," 17. (I was given a photocopy of this article by the author; unfortunately, I have no further information on it.)

28. *Programmaboek Congres "Balans en Perspectief"* (Utrecht, 1986), 50.

29. This, of course, refers to K. Löwith's thesis in his *Meaning in History* (Chicago, 1970).

30. Lyotard, 49–63.

31. F. R. Ankersmit, "De Chiasmatische Verhouding Tussen Literatuur en Geschiedenis," in *Spektator* (October, 1986), 101–120.

of the pretensions of the social historians. But the worst modernists are still to be found among philosophers of history — which, incidentally, is not so surprising; they cheer any pseudoscientific ostentation even more readily than do historians, as soon as they think they see in it the confirmation of their worn-out positivist ideas.

I would like to clarify the movement in historical consciousness indicated above by means of the following image. Compare history to a tree. The essentialist tradition within Western historiography focused the attention of historians on the trunk of the tree. This was, of course, the case with the speculative systems; they defined, so to speak, the nature and form of this trunk. Historism and modernist scientific historiography, with their basically praiseworthy attention to what in fact happened in the past and their lack of receptiveness towards apriorist schemes, were situated on the branches of the tree. However, from that position their attention did remain focused on the trunk. Just like their speculative predecessors, both the historists and the protagonists of a so-called scientific historiography still had the hope and the pretension of ultimately being able to say something about that trunk after all. The close ties between this so-called scientific social history and Marxism are significant in this context. Whether it was formulated in ontological, epistemological, or methodological terminology, historiography since historism has always aimed at the reconstruction of the essentialist line running through the past or parts of it.

With the postmodernist historiography found in particular in the history of mentalities, a break is made for the first time with this centuries-old essentialist tradition — to which I immediately add, to avoid any pathos and exaggeration, that I am referring here to trends and not to radical breaks. The choice no longer falls on the trunk or on the branches, but on the leaves of the tree. Within the postmodernist view of history, the goal is no longer integration, synthesis, and totality, but it is those historical scraps which are the center of attention. Take, for example, *Montaillou* and other books written subsequently by Le Roy Ladurie, Ginzburg's *Microstorie*, Duby's *Sunday of Bouvines* or Natalie Zemon Davis's *Return of Martin Guerre*. Fifteen to twenty years ago we would have asked ourselves in amazement whatever the point could be of this kind of historical writing, what it is trying to prove. And this very obvious question would have been prompted then, as it always is, by our modernist desire to get to know how the machine of history works. However, in the anti-essentialist, nominalistic view of postmodernism, this question has lost its meaning. If we want to adhere to essentialism anyway, we can say that the essence is not situated in the branches, nor in the trunk, but in the leaves of the historical tree.

This brings me to the main point of this article. It is characteristic of leaves that they are relatively loosely attached to the tree and when autumn or winter comes, they are blown away by the wind. For various reasons, we can presume that autumn has come to Western historiography. In the first place, there is of course the postmodernist nature of our own time. Our anti-essentialism, or, as it is popularly called these days, "anti-foundationalism," has lessened our com-

mitment to science and traditional historiography. The changed position of Europe in the world since 1945 is a second important indication. The history of this appendage to the Eurasian continent is no longer world history.³² What we would like to see as the trunk of the tree of Western history has become part of a whole forest. The *meta-récits* we would like to tell ourselves about our history, the triumph of Reason, the glorious struggle for emancipation of the nineteenth-century workers' proletariat, are only of local importance and for that reason can no longer be suitable metanarratives. The chilly wind which, according to Romein, rose around 1900 simultaneously in both the West and the East,³³ finally blew the leaves off our historical tree as well in the second half of this century.

What remains now for Western historiography is to gather the leaves that have been blown away and to study them independently of their origins. This means that our historical consciousness has, so to speak, been turned inside out. When we collect the leaves of the past in the same way as Le Roy Ladurie or Ginzburg, what is important is no longer the place they had on the tree, but the pattern we can form from them *now*, the way in which this pattern can be adapted to other forms of civilization existing now. "Beginning in the days of Goethe and Macaulay and Carlyle and Emerson," wrote Rorty, "a kind of writing has developed which is neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor epistemology, nor social prophecy, but all of these mingled together in a new genre."³⁴ In his commentary on this statement of Rorty's, Culler points out the remarkable indifference with regard to origin and context, historical or otherwise, which is so characteristic of "this new kind of writing":

the practitioners of particular disciplines complain that works claimed by the genre are studied outside the proper disciplinary matrix: students of theory read Freud without enquiring whether later psychological research may have disputed his formulations; they read Derrida without having mastered the philosophical tradition; they read Marx without studying alternative descriptions of political and economic situations.³⁵

The right historical context has lost its traditional importance, function, and naturalness as background, not because one is so eager to take up an ahistorical position or lacks the desire to do justice to the course of history, but because one has "let go of" the historical context. Everything now announces itself unannounced and in this lies the only hope we still have of being able to keep our heads above water in the future. Just as the leaves of the tree are not attached to one another and their interrelation was only guaranteed by the branch or the trunk, it was the abovementioned essentialist assumptions which used to ensure the very prominent role played by this reassuring "historical context."

32. Striking proof of the sharply decreased significance of the European past is offered by M. Ferro, *Hoe de Geschiedenis aan Kinderen Wordt Verteld* (Weesp, 1985).

33. J. Romein, *Op het Breukvlak van Twee Eeuwen* (Amsterdam, 1967), I, 35.

34. Culler, 8.

35. *Idem*.

Don't misunderstand me. I am not talking about the candidacy of a new form of subjectivity, the legitimation of imposing contemporary patterns on the past. Legitimizing anything at all can best be left to the modernists. The essence of postmodernism is precisely that we should avoid pointing out essentialist patterns in the past. We can consequently have our doubts about the meaningfulness of recent attempts to breathe new life into the old German ideal of *Bildung* for the sake of the position and the reputation of historiography.³⁶ I would, incidentally, like to add immediately that I am nevertheless much more in sympathy with these attempts than with the scientific naiveté demonstrated by social historians regarding the task and the usefulness of historiography. However, going into the hopes raised by a socioscientific historiography would be flogging a dead horse. The resuscitation of the ideal of *Bildung*, on the other hand, is indeed a meaningful reaction to the map-like nature of our present-day civilization. Whereas civilization in the past showed more resemblance to a direction-indicator which provided relatively unambiguous directions for social and moral behavior, present-day civilization does not teach us where we have to go any more than a map does; nor, if we have already made our choice, does it teach us whether we should travel by way of the shortest route or by way of a picturesque detour. Realization of the ideal of *Bildung* would at most give us a good picture of the road we have travelled up until now. The ideal of *Bildung* is the cultural counterpart of Ernst Haeckel's famous thesis that the development of the separate individual is a shortened version of that of the species. *Bildung* is the shortened version of the history of civilization on the scale of the separate individual, through which he can become a valuable and decent member of our society.

However, within the postmodernist historical consciousness, this shortened ontogenetic repeat of our cultural phylogenesis is no longer meaningful. The links in the evolution of this series of historical contexts of which our cultural phylogenesis consists have after all been broken apart. Everything has become contemporary, with the remarkable correlate, to use Duby's expression, that everything has also become history. When history is reassembled in the present, this means that the present has taken on the stigma of the past. *Bildung* consequently requires the orientation on a compass that is rejected by postmodernism. We must not shape ourselves according to or in conformity with the past, but learn to play our cultural game with it. What this statement means *in concrete terms* was described by Rousseau for the separate individual in the following way in his *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*: there is an

36. In November 1985, a forum on *Bildung* was organized by the arts Faculty in Groningen. Among the speakers were M. A. Wes, E. H. Kossmann, and J. J. A. Mooij. See also E. H. Kossmann, *De Functie van een Alpha-Faculteit* (Groningen, 1985); Kossmann also observes that the *Bildung* ideals of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century can no longer be realized in our time: "It is, after all, self-evident that an ideal of *Bildung* in today's situation cannot be a homogeneous, prescriptive pattern of ethical and aesthetical standards and set erudition. Rather, it will be in the form of an inventory of possible ethical and aesthetic standards, of objectives which are possible and which have at the same time in history been realized by mankind. The present ideal of *Bildung* is not prescriptive but descriptive, it is not closed but open" (23).

état où l'âme trouve une assiette assez solide pour s'y reposer tout entière et rassemble là tout son être, sans avoir besoin de rappeler le passé ni d'enjamber sur l'avenir; où le temps ne soit rien pour elle, où le présent dure toujours sans néanmoins marquer sa durée et sans aucune trace de succession.³⁷

And Rousseau subsequently points out that such a way of dealing with time awakes a feeling of complete happiness in our lives — “un bonheur suffisant, parfait et plein, qui ne laisse dans l'âme aucun vide qu'elle sente le besoin de remplir.”³⁸

History here is no longer the reconstruction of what has happened to us in the various phases of our lives, but a continuous playing with the memory of this. The memory has priority over what is remembered. Something similar is true for historiography. The wild, greedy, and uncontrolled digging into the past, inspired by the desire to discover a past reality and reconstruct it scientifically, is no longer the historian's unquestioned task. We would do better to examine the result of a hundred and fifty years' digging more attentively and ask ourselves more often what all this adds up to. The time has come that we should *think* about the past, rather than *investigate* it.

However, a phase in historiography has perhaps now begun in which meaning is more important than reconstruction and genesis; a phase in which the goal historians set themselves is to discover the meaning of a number of fundamental conflicts in our past by demonstrating their contemporaneity. Let us look at a few examples. An insight such as Hegel's into the conflict between Socrates and the Athenian State may conflict in a thousand places with what we now know about the Athens of about 400 B.C., but it will nevertheless not lose its force. A second example: What Foucault wrote about the close link between power and discourse aiming at truth or about the very curious relation between language and reality in the sixteenth century was attacked on factual grounds by many critics, but this does not mean that his conceptions have lost their fascination. I am not saying that historical truth and reliability are of no importance or are even obstacles on the road to a more meaningful historiography. On the contrary: examples like Hegel or Foucault show us, however — and that is why I chose them — that the metaphorical dimension in historiography is more powerful than the literal or factual dimensions. The philological Wilamowitz, who tries to refute Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, is like someone who tries to overturn a train carriage singlehanded; criticizing metaphors on factual grounds is indeed an activity which is just as pointless as it is tasteless. Only metaphors “refute” metaphors.

And that brings me to my final remarks. As I have suggested, there is reason to assume that our relation to the past and our insight into it will in future be of a metaphorical nature rather than a literal one. What I mean is this. The literal statement “this table is two meters long” directs our attention to a particular state of affairs outside language itself which is expressed by it. A metaphorical utterance such as “history is a tree without a trunk” — to use an apt example — shifts

37. J. J. Rousseau, *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (Paris, 1972), 101.

38. *Idem*.

the accent to what is happening between the mere *words* “history” and “tree without a trunk.” In the postmodernist view, the focus is no longer on the past itself, but on the incongruity between present and past, between the language we presently use for speaking about the past and the past itself. There is no longer “one line running through history” to neutralize this incongruity. This explains the attention to the seemingly incongruous but surprising and hopefully even disturbing detail which Freud in his essay on the *Unheimliche* defined as “was im Verborgenen hatte bleiben sollen und hervorgetreten ist”³⁹; in short, attention to everything which is meaningless and irrelevant precisely from the point of view of scientific historiography. For these incongruous, *Unheimliche* events do justice to the incongruity of the historian’s language in its relation to the past.

Just as postmodernism since Nietzsche and Heidegger has criticized the whole so-called logocentric tradition in philosophy since Socrates and Plato, that is, the rationalistic faith that Reason will enable us to solve the secrets of reality, postmodernist historiography also has a natural nostalgia for a pre-Socratic early history. The earliest historiography of the Greeks was epic; the Greeks told one another about the deeds of their ancestors in the past in narrative epics. The stories they told one another were not mutually exclusive, despite their contradicting each other, because they inspired above all ethical and aesthetic contemplation. Because war and political conflict stimulated a more profound social and political awareness and because the written word has much less tolerance for divergent traditions than the spoken word, the “logocentric” uniformization of the past was introduced after and by Hecataeus, Herodotus, and Thucydides.⁴⁰ With this, the young trunk of the tree of the past appeared above ground. I certainly do not mean to suggest that we should return to the days before Hecataeus. Here, too, it is a question of a metaphorical truth rather than a literal one. Postmodernism does not reject scientific historiography, but only draws our attention to the modernists’ vicious circle which would have us believe that nothing exists outside it. However, outside it is the whole domain of historical purpose and meaning.

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39. S. Freud, “Das Unheimliche,” in *Sigmund Freud: Studienausgabe IV. Psychologische Schriften* (Frankfurt, 1982), 264.

40. For these remarks on the origins of Greek historical consciousness I am greatly indebted to Mrs. J. Krul-Blok.