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The Presence of Historical Thinking

(2002)

When I say that “I am a historian,” what does this statement mean? What do people understand by it? Three hundred years ago they would have been unaccustomed to such a designation. Now their first, and most probable, association is: it is this man’s occupation. Or, more precisely: it is his professional affiliation. “A historian”—so he is probably employed in some institution of higher education.¹

I do not wish to object to such a professional designation of myself: but it is not entirely to my taste. Yes, early in my life I chose to become a professional historian, to acquire a necessary degree of certification to enable me to seek such employment, to teach in a higher institution of learning, to be admitted into the guild of professional historians, to be recognized as such. All of this has been of course preceded—and succeeded—by something deeper: by an interest in history, but also by my developing sense of a vocation. Interest, inclination, vocation: three overlapping but distinct phases. The consciousness of such a distinction may appear only in retrospect. But that there is a difference, though of course not necessarily an opposition, between a vocation and a professional identification or certification, ought to be obvious.

A sense of vocation, though perhaps rare, is not necessarily good. Fanatics have such a sense; obsessive minds may have such a sense. At the same time a sense of vocation ought to involve at least some self-searching. Very early in my life and in my professional career I began to be interested not only in certain matters of the past about which I wished to know more and more; not only in certain periods of the past, but also in certain problems of their history; in problems of our historical knowledge. The motives of such questioning are almost always mixed and not easily ascertainable. They may not be separable from personal disillusionments and disappoint-

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ments (in my case from the pretended objectivism in the writings and from the gray ice on the faces of certain professional historians); but, as in everything else, one may know one's purposes better than one's motives. In my life, this led me, perhaps at an unduly early stage of my "professional" career, to think and read and gather material and plan for a work dealing with problems about our very knowledge of history itself, questions including a few novel and radical propositions. They are there in *Historical Consciousness*, a book that took me—with various interruptions—almost thirteen years to complete. It was during my work on the first, often convoluted, draft of *Historical Consciousness* that, sometime in the late summer of 1958, I suddenly found that I might have arrived at what seemed to me an intellectual discovery of considerable magnitude. In any event, that was a crucial stage in my intellectual pilgrimage and in my historical vocation.

This is a personal record. Yet it is not autobiographical. I cannot but cite a great Hungarian Catholic poet, János Pilinszky, who wrote how he had been inspired to recognize this condition by reading St. Augustine and Simone Weil: "There are the personal, the non-personal, and the collective areas of life. One cannot reach the non-personal except from what is personal; from the collective, never. Something must become personal first; after that one may go forward to what is no longer personal."



ALL living beings have their own evolution and their own life span. But human beings are the only living beings who know that they live while they live—who know, and not only instinctively feel, that they are going to die. Other living beings have an often extraordinary and accurate sense of time. But we have a sense of our history, which amounts to something else. Scientific knowledge, dependent as it is on a scientific method, is by its nature open to question. The existence of historical knowledge, the inevitable presence of the past in our minds, is not. We are all historians by nature, while we are scientists only by choice.

Modern scientific thinking appeared about three or four hundred years ago, together with a then-new view of the globe and of the universe. It meant the methodical investigation of nature, and eventually the manipulation of a kind of knowledge which, once applied, changed the world and our lives in unimaginable ways. Eventually Science came to mean (mostly, though not exclusively) the Science of Nature: our knowledge of things and of organisms other than ourselves. At the same time, about three or four hundred years ago, there occurred another evolution, first in Western Europe: a passage from a kind of historical thinking that had existed for a long time to a kind of historical consciousness that was a relatively new

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phenomenon. Of these two developments the importance of the first, of Science, has of course been recognized—with every reason, given its successive and successful applications; the second, hardly at all. Yet it may be argued that the second, involving man’s knowledge of man, may have been—perhaps more and more evidently now—as important, if not more important, than the first.



SHAKESPEARE in *Henry V*: “There is a history in all men’s lives.” This poetic phrase has a wider meaning in the democratic age, issuing from a recognition that every person is a historical person (and that every source is a historical source).² This is—or rather, should be—obvious. No less obvious is one result of the democratic development of the world. This has been the widening of the nineteenth-century practice of largely political history toward social history, from the history of governments to the history of the governed. (Alas, so many of the proponents and practitioners of the latter have been treating history as a kind of retrospective sociology.) Together with this widening there also have been attempts to deepen the scope and sharpen the focus of historical research. (Alas, so many of the so-called postmodern theoreticians of history have been writing analyses of texts and of statistics employing large quantities of words or numbers in the service of small amounts of thought.)

There is the past; there is the remembered past; there is the recorded past. The past is very large, and it gets larger every minute: we do not and cannot know all of it. Its remnant evidences help: but they, too, are protean and cannot be collected and recorded in their entirety. Thus history is more than the recorded past; it consists of the recorded and the recordable and the remembered past. The past in our minds *is* memory. Human beings cannot create, or even imagine, anything that is entirely new. (The Greek word for “truth,” *aletheia*, also means “not forgetting.”) “There is not a vestige of real creativity *de novo* in us,” C. S. Lewis once wrote. No one can even imagine an entirely new color; or an entirely new animal; or even a third sex. At best (or worst) one can imagine a new combination of already existing—that is, known to us—colors, or monsters, or sexes. There is a startling and corresponding recognition of this condition in Goethe’s *Theory of Colors*. In the preface of that extraordinary and difficult work he wrote that “strictly speaking, it is useless to attempt to express the nature of a thing abstractedly. . . . We should try in vain to describe a man’s character, but let his acts be collected and an idea of the character will be presented to us.” And: “As we before expressed the opinion that the history of an individual displays his character, so it may here be well affirmed that the

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history of science is science itself.”³ This is a prophetic foretelling of Heisenberg and Bohr, who more than one hundred years later were compelled to conclude that the history of quantum theory *is* quantum theory; or that the best way to teach quantum theory is to teach its historical evolution. William James wrote: “You can give humanistic value to almost anything by teaching it historically. Geology, economics, mechanics, are humanities when taught by reference to the successive achievements of the geniuses to whom these sciences owe their being. Not taught thus, literature remains grammar, art a catalogue, history a list of dates, and natural science a sheet of formulas and weights and measures.”⁴

In sum, the history of anything amounts to that thing itself. History is not a social science but an unavoidable form of thought. That “we live forward but we can only think backward” is true not only of the present (which is always a fleeting illusion) but of our entire view of the future: for even when we think of the future we do this by *remembering* it. But history cannot tell us anything about the future with certainty. Intelligent research, together with a stab of psychological understanding, may enable us to reconstruct something from the past; still, it cannot help us predict the future. There are many reasons for this unpredictability (for believing Christians let me say that providence is one); but another (God-ordained) element is that no two human beings have ever been exactly the same. History is real; but it cannot be made to “work,” because of its unpredictability. A curious paradox is that while science is abstract, it can be made to work. Abraham Lincoln (or one’s grandmother) *really* existed; there was and will be no one exactly like him or like her. But the material elements of Science never exist in perfect or unalloyed form. H₂O is a most useful definition of water; yet of a liquid that, in reality, does not and cannot absolutely exist: we may find, or produce, a distillation of 99.99 percent H₂O but not of 100 percent “purity.” Yet because of mechanical causality, scientific knowledge can be put to practical use: to a nearly incredible extent of precision and of predictability it can be made to “work.”

One reason for this paradox is the essential difference between mechanical and other historical causalities; that what happens is inseparable from what people think happens. Inseparable: but not identical, and also not enduring. People may be wrong in thinking what happens, and they may have been wrong in thinking what happened. A man thinks that the motor stopped because of the failure of the water pump, whereas it was the oil pump. When he then learns that the real source of the trouble was the oil pump, his realization of the source of the trouble means an increase in the quantity and in the extent of his knowledge. But when it comes to a human event, a later realization that what had happened was not what we



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thought happened usually involves an increase of the *quality* of our knowledge, together with a decrease of the quantity in our memory. (Something happens to us today, something bothersome, whereof we can remember the smallest details. A few years later we recall that day, having forgotten many of its details; yet we may say to ourselves: “Why was I so upset about that then?” Or: “Why had I not noticed that then?” The quantity of our knowledge of the details of that day has waned; but the quality of our knowledge—and understanding—of what had happened may have increased.)

Human understanding is a matter of quality, not of quantity. At times it is a (sudden, rather than gradual) synthesis of accumulated knowledge. But this happens not often. The purpose of understanding differs from the scientific purpose of certainty, and of accuracy. We also know that human understanding of other human beings is always, and necessarily, imperfect. There are odd and illogical elements in its functioning. One of them is that understanding may precede knowledge, instead of being simply consequent to it. Another is that understanding, too, depends on memory. We often think that a failure, or defect, of memory amounts to an insufficiency of knowledge. Yet there, too, there is some kind of understanding at the bottom of the trouble, since we both understand and know what we wish to recall, except that we cannot yet bring those words or names or numbers up to the surface of our mind clearly. Another example is the inevitable dependence of understanding on comparison and contrast. That contrast is an inevitable element of color, indeed, of the very act of seeing. An early proponent of this inevitable condition was the Renaissance painter, poet, philosopher, musician, architect Alberti. Critical of the categorical “definitions” of philosophers, Leone Battista Alberti wrote *On Painting*: “All knowledge of large, small; long, short; high, low; broad, narrow; clear, dark; light and shadow and every similar attribute is obtained by comparison. . . . All things are known by comparison, for comparison contains within itself a power which immediately demonstrates. . . .”⁵ And just as our act of seeing depends on contrast, our knowledge of the present depends on our knowledge of the past.

This dependence of understanding on contrast and comparison does not necessarily mean the relativity of all human knowledge. “But where would we be if we could speak only of things we know with certainty?” asked the sixteenth-century French historian Henri Voisin de La Popelinière—who nonetheless proposed the necessity of advancing to a “complete” history, including much besides the recorded acts and discourses of rulers.⁶ Four hundred years later the solitary Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin wrote that neither human understanding nor creative thinking is the result of a synthesis. “On the contrary, it consists in the intensification

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of one's own *distinctness* from others; it consists in fully exploiting the privilege of one's own unique place outside other human beings." This is not solipsism, not subjectivism, and not even relativism. "This outsideness must be preserved if solidarity with others is to be fruitful. . . . Our empathy with others [must be] completed with elements of our own perspective. Sympathetic understanding is not a mirroring, but a fundamentally and essentially new valuation, a utilization of my own architectonic position in being outside another's inner place."⁷ Outside, yes: but with the intention to understand the other one, to participate, even if to a necessarily incomplete extent. Of course: love is always the love of *another*.⁸

But perhaps the most important element of historical thinking is the understanding that our knowledge of history (indeed, our entire knowledge of the past; indeed, even our personal memory) is not and cannot be restricted to "what actually happened," since potentiality is inherent in actuality. This is true of "great" historical events as well as of intimate human situations, because human inclinations, even when they do not mature into definite acts, are essentially potential signs of actualities. As Johan Huizinga wrote: "The sociologist, etc., deals with his material as if the outcome were given in the known facts: he simply searches for the way in which the result was already determined in the facts. The historian, on the other hand, must always maintain towards his subject an indeterminist point of view. He must constantly put himself at a point in the past at which the known factors still seem to permit different outcomes. If he speaks of Salamis, then it must be as if the Persians might still win. . . ."⁹

The relationship of potentiality and actuality correspond to the difference—again, a qualitative as much as a quantitative difference—between what is significant and what is important. Here is the essential difference between historical and legal evidence—or between historical and legal thinking. Law (at least in a state governed by a constitution) can deal only with actuality, not with potentiality. "The law is a coarse net; and truth is a slippery fish." Yes: but the purpose of law has nothing to do with truth; it is the establishment of justice. Truth and justice are not the same things, even though the pursuit of truth and the pursuit of justice may, on occasion, overlap. But besides the question (or, rather, the obvious primacy) of truth over justice, there are other important differences between historical and legal evidences and thinking. One is that law, after all—inevitably and necessarily—is a closed system, within its own definite rules and regulations. For instance, it does not and should not allow multiple jeopardy: a case, when and if properly tried, is decided once and for all. History (and our memory) is open and never closed; it specializes in multiple jeopardy: its subjects and people are rethought over and over again, and not even neces-

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sarily on the basis of newly found evidence. There may be five hundred biographies of Lincoln, but there is hardly reason to doubt that sooner or later there will be a 501st one with something new in its contents, and not necessarily because of new materials that its author has found, but because of a new viewpoint. Another great difference—I am again referring principally to Anglo-American law—is the one between motives and purposes. These two are regrettably confused because of the vocabulary and the practices of twentieth-century psychology and thought, the attribution of motive having become a pestilential intellectual habit.¹⁰ But we must distinguish between the two. Motives come from the past; purposes involve the pull of the future. At its best, Anglo-American law will admit only a “motive” which has been, in one way or another, expressed; in other words, an actuality, not a potentiality. (As Dr. Johnson said: “Intentions must be gathered from acts.”) At its worst, unexpressed motives are sometimes attributed and accepted in some courts on the basis of psychological characterization or other dubious “expertise.” A proper comprehension of the essential difference between motives and purposes is an essential condition of the pursuit and of the protection of justice and of truth—and of all historical thinking and speaking and writing.

Historical thinking accords with the recognition that human knowledge is neither objective nor subjective but personal and participant. Conscientiousness (*conscientia*) is participant knowledge. Nearly four hundred years ago Descartes argued, in his *Discourse on Method*, that the study of history was wasteful because we cannot acquire any accurate or certain knowledge of the human past, as we can of mathematics and of the world of nature. Yet another century after Descartes, Vico “said just the opposite. His claim was that the principles of human society, the ‘civil world’ as he calls it, are actually more certain than the principles governing the natural world, because civil society is a human creation”¹¹—to which let me add that “the natural world,” too, is inseparable from our knowledge of it—for us.



THE professionalization of history—or in other words: the certification of historianship—has brought about great, widespread, and fruitful results during the past two hundred years, and especially during the nineteenth century. Still . . . some of the finest historians of the past two hundred years did not have professional degrees. (You can be a poet without having a PhD in Poetry, and, yes, you can be a historian without having a PhD in History.) A problem for most professional historians is that their certification and their craft and their methods are still bound to the practices (and often to the philosophy) of historianship established in the nineteenth cen-

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ture, even though during the twentieth century great changes occurred in the structures of states and societies, together with changes in what I call the structure of events. Except here and there, most historians have been unwilling or unable to adjust the requirements of their craft to these changes. This is understandable (even when it is less justifiable) because of personal reasons, ranging from the conformism of an intellectual bureaucrat to the respectable seriousness of a traditional craftsman. Many of us have met many a “historian” whose main interest seems to be not the study of history but his historianship, meaning his standing within the profession—a failure in character. Yet we have also met many other historians whose interest and work in history is impervious to fads—small triumphs of character. More important: many of the methods and practices of research and management of sources established by the great historians of the nineteenth century are still valid. But before I turn to some of the problems with “sources,” let me make bold to suggest something that more and more professional historians uneasily sense, even though they may be reluctant to state it: that behind the problem of “sources” looms the obvious recognition that documents do not by themselves “make” history; rather, it is history that makes documents. For history is, and always was, something more than a study of records; and just as actuality must, by necessity, include at least a recognition of the element of potentiality, if history is the memory of mankind (which it is), then it is something more than the recorded past; it must include something of the remembered past, too.

That a new structure of society involves new perspectives Tocqueville saw almost 180 years ago. He saw the forest from the trees with an astonishingly clear and acute eye. There is a small chapter, consisting of forty-eight sentences, in the second volume of *Democracy in America*, “Some Characteristics of Historians in Democratic Times,” that ought to be read and re-read by every historian. (And Tocqueville also practiced what he preached: these generalizations in *Democracy in America* [which was not a history] became, here and there, incarnated in his own history writing twenty years later, in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*.) The great clear insight of Alexis the Forester was his recognition that above and beyond the Ancient-Middle-Modern periodization of history in the West rose the present transformation of entire societies into democracies: the passage from the aristocratic to the democratic age; from peoples ruled by minorities to peoples ruled by majorities (even though that is not entirely identical with peoples ruling *themselves*). And it is because of this evolving democratization of the world that some of the problems of modern historical research—and writing—have arisen. I can only sum up some of them inadequately and briefly.

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There is the problem of the quantity of materials with which the historian must deal. The nineteenth-century ideal—in many ways, still current—was that of definiteness and completion, meaning the filling of particular gaps in history (more precisely: in our professional historical knowledge) properly and perfectly, in accordance with the accepted norms and methods of the profession. There was (and there still is) merit in this ideal of history being something like the building of a vast and impressive cathedral, to which its professional workmen contribute by adding small pillars here and there, including the filling of small gaps with one brick, if needed, as for example with dissertations or monographs of minor scope. Yet we must keep in mind that no cathedral is ever completed; that repairs and restructurings are needed from time to time; that the very surroundings of the cathedral change; and that every generation will see the cathedral in new and different ways. And perhaps even more important is the condition that even a great cathedral does not a city make; that with the onset of democracy we have, by necessity, extended the scope of history, so far as its themes and topics go, to the lives (and records) of all kinds of people; so far as its “methods”¹² go, beyond the official archives. History *does* depend on records, but it is not merely a matter of records. And the quantity (and the scope) of materials with which the modern historian deals is greater than ever before. The ideal that, at least concerning a small topic, the historian can—and must—have read everything written about it, exhausting all of the “sources,” in many cases is no longer possible, or even reasonably expectable. And then there is the other problem, related to quantity. Democracy, almost invariably, leads to inflation: inflation in the number of people, inflation of papers, inflation of bureaucracy, inflation of records. One hundred years ago it was at least approximately (though not completely) possible for a historian to have read almost all the papers and documentary evidence written to and by and about a political or literary figure. This is no longer so. A “definite” history is necessarily an exaggeration; and an “orthodox” history is necessarily a contradiction in terms.

This oceanic rise in the quantity of potentially useful materials for the historian is of course inseparable from the problem of their quality. (When there is more and more of something, it is worth less and less.) But that is not all. The quality of every document, of every record, indeed of every kind of human expression, depends on its authenticity. With the oceanic tide of documents—the combined results of spreading democracy, spreading technology, spreading bureaucracy—the authenticity of “sources” with which the historian must deal decreases; in some cases it even disappears. The nineteenth-century canonical rule regarding historical evidence, the essential distinction between “primary” (that is, direct) and “secondary”

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(that is, successive and indirect) sources is being washed away. Through telephone, teletype, fax, e-mail, and so on, many statements are unreconstructable, unrecorded, disappearing fast. We also have important documents—for example, letters by presidents (and not only speeches by speechwriters and other expressions)—that were not only not written but not even dictated or read by them or signed by their own hand. There are records of twentieth-century presidential cabinet sessions that are less authentic than a postcard from one's grandmother found in an old drawer: no matter how mundane are the few words on that postcard, its authenticity exists because of that spiky handwriting, the old stamp and postmark, the yellowed cardboard, its musty smell.

This drastic mutation in the very essence of historical records has its special dangers. The recently fashionable practice of social history does not confront them, at least as long as it is sociological rather than sociographical, which is, alas, often the case.¹³ The bringing up of records and statistics of all kinds from distant pasts presents another kind of danger: as far as the records go, the danger is not so much their authenticity as their incompleteness; as far as statistics go, the danger exists in the difficulty—at times, impossibility—of ascertaining their correctness. Sooner or later a historian with an independent mind ought to compose a guidebook: “New Problems of Historical Research,” a list of warnings about new particular problems. I can mention only a general one. Many of the present “schools” of social history depend on the concept of Economic Man, from the—at times veiled—“scientific” belief that the basic realities of human existence and of historic life and development are material, whereof the mores and morals and thoughts and beliefs of most people are the superstructures. My belief, from an early time in my life, has been the opposite: that (perhaps especially in the democratic age and in democratic societies) the most important matter is what people think and believe—and that the entire material organization of society, ranging from superficial fashions to their material acquisitions and to their institutions—are the consequences thereof.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, at the very end of the Modern Age, many professional historians seem to agree that historical “objectivity” and historical “determinism” are no longer sacrosanct, indeed, that they are questionable. Yet for many of them this means little more than the mere nodding of heads otherwise preoccupied, since they keep writing and teaching as if history were still determined. The fad for “psychohistory” in the 1960s, the “postmodern” definitions of conditions of “discourse,” and the recent tendency among French historians to write about “mentalités” seldom amount, alas, to more than an uneasy feeling of

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progress along the dusty shoulders of a great roadway on which many stones had broken through the old rutted surface, making the marching a bit uncomfortable (not to speak of the heavy motorized traffic on it). A learned Hungarian thinker and unequaled master of literary history, Antal Szerb (he was murdered in 1944, in the same year as the great French historian Marc Bloch), wrote in his *Introduction to the History of Hungarian Literature* (1934) two prophetic and radiant sentences: “The new science of psychology is still in its infancy, so much so that for an auxiliary science it is nearly useless. In that field the writer of literary history remains alone, bereft of assistance; what he may try could be, at best, an attempt toward a new kind of knowledge that would consist of the study of the historical developments of spiritual and mental structures; perhaps one day that will be called spiritual history—that is, once it appears.” Two sentences worth more than many of the volumes nowadays laboriously composed by proponents of psychohistory or of sociological history.

One very random illustration of the disinclination of otherwise well-meaning and thorough and serious historians to consider the personal and participant conditions—and responsibilities—of knowledge I recently found in an otherwise excellent large book by Heinz Huerten, *Deutsche Katholiken, 1918–1945*, which goes beyond the necessarily narrow framework of ecclesiastical history. In his chapter “The German Catholic Church and the Murder of the Jews,” in which Huerten introduces the problematic question whether German Catholics, priests, and bishops have been true to their faith during the Third Reich, he writes: “Since their decisions were essentially personal ones, they cannot be ultimately criticized by science, and even less can they be offered scientifically.” Even keeping in mind that the German word *Wissenschaft*, meaning “science” and “knowledge,” is broader than the English “science,” and with all respect for Huerten’s sincerity, such a separation of the “personal” from the “scientific” is inadequate, insufficient.



TO ignore the unavoidable personal—and participatory—element of human and historical knowledge is of course the great failure of objectivism. But there is another (and, in many of its instances, postmodern) danger, when the recognition of the shortcomings of historical objectivism results in Subjectivism. This is the case of (the once Marxist) E. H. Carr’s *What Is History?* (1961). Carr’s central argument is that “before you study the history, study the historian,” and “before you study the historian, study his historical and social environment.” This is a half-truth. The recognition that different persons see the past (and also the present) differently, and

that thus every historian is different, does not mean that because he is the product of his past he cannot do otherwise. How about the sons of rich parents who chose to become Marxist? Or—how about former Marxists who chose to become neoconservatives?¹⁴ Carr’s argument is nothing but a subjective form of determinism denying not only free will but hopelessly confusing motives and purposes.¹⁵

This kind of subjectivism is also inherent in the neoidealist R. G. Collingwood. Recognizing that a German historian who was born in 1900 would see the past differently from a French historian who was born in 1800, Collingwood concluded, “There is no point in asking which was the right point of view. Each was the only one possible for the man who adopted it.” *The only one possible?* This is determinism—subjectivist determinism—again. That French historian in 1800 could have been a monarchist, or a republican, or a Bonapartist; that German historian could have been an imperialist or a liberal.¹⁶ That would influence (influence, not determine) their perspectives of the past as well. (To carry this further: the French historian in 1800 could be a Germanophile or a Germanophobe; the German historian in 1900 a Francophobe or a Francophile. That could even affect the choice of their interests: it is at least imaginable that a German historian in 1900 could prefer to read and write about Louis XV and a French historian in 1800 about Frederick William I.)

It is here that the twentieth-century subjectivists, from the early Croce to Becker and Beard and many of the “postmoderns,” slid into error. They could not liberate themselves from the scientific worldview, from Descartes’ world divided into subjects and objects and from Newton’s world where causes always and inevitably precede effects, and where the present is always the product of the past. They went wrong not because they were attacking the illusion of objectivity; they went wrong because, like the objectivists, they were thinking in terms of direct causes, of men as products. Thus subjectivism is also inherent in the neo-idealists Collingwood and Oakeshott, whose otherwise valuable recognitions of the errors of objectivism and materialism and positivism have moved them toward the morass of a merely philosophical—that is, abstract—idealism that is essentially subjectivist.¹⁷

However—my purpose here is not philosophical; it is, rather, a reminder for historians of some things that are real. Such recognitions of reality are inseparable from the knowledge of our own limitations, including the limitations of our profession, of our methods, of our craft. As in all human thought, in history these include the limitations of language. Historians must constantly keep in mind that the instruments of their craft (and of course of all their thinking) are words, because we think and teach and

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write with words. It is not only that memory is the womb of the human psyche, and that the Muses were the daughters of Memory: Mnemosyne. The sudden development of speech in children is indeed mysterious, because words are the fundamental signs and symbols of emerging consciousness. They are more than abstract symbols, or units of communication; they are symbols not of *things* but of *meanings*—not of something merely physical but essentially of something mental. Meaning always has an element of revelation in it (whence “literal” vs. “symbolic” meaning is a false distinction). And language exists, grows, and fades together with memory.¹⁸

Language is not perfect. It exists to communicate, but only what it can communicate. Some things it communicates badly. At the same time the language which can easily make the finest and most numerous distinctions of meaning is the best one. The great danger during our present passage from a verbal to visual “culture” is latent in the impoverishment of language. But language still contains an element of mystery within it: the mystery which is inherent in every human volition, in every human act, and which too is in essence a matter of quality.¹⁹ And the quality of every human expression depends not only on one’s choice of words but also on the intention of the expression and on its historical circumstances. This corresponds to the, alas, overdue recognition that ideas do not exist apart from the men and women who choose to represent and express them—and *when*.



YES: historical circumstances—because the meaning of every human expression (and hence the meaning of every idea) is inseparable from not only how and where and to whom it is stated but *when*: conditions of historicity that are inseparable from and inherent in the speaker’s or writer’s intention. Here are two examples. “There are Communists who are murderers.” Imagine a Pole or a Russian, say, in 1948, standing up and saying this in Warsaw or Minsk, at a public meeting ruled by Stalinist bureaucrats and chaired by a Communist government minister. Now imagine the same words shouted at a meeting of Young Republicans in, say, Chicago, 1952. Or: “A German Jew is at least as good as a Viennese Nazi.” Imagine a German man or woman saying this loudly in a crowded Berlin trolley car in 1942, as he sees a Jewish man pushed off the platform by an S.S. man bellowing with an Austrian accent. Now imagine the same words pronounced in New York before an audience of liberals and emigrés. The differences exist not only in the qualities of courage of the first speakers; and not only because they were directed to different people. I am inclined to think that in the given (that is, historical) circumstances somehow the first statements

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were *truer* than the second ones: more precisely, they came *closer* to the truth, because they were more remarkable statements in the pursuit of truth, in the midst of the ugly presence and prevalence of accepted untruths. They rang with a higher quality of truth.

Justice is of a lower order than is truth, and untruth is lower than is injustice. The administration of justice, even with the best intentions of correcting injustice, may often have to ignore or overlook untruths during the judicial process. We live and are capable of living with many injustices, with many shortcomings of justice; but what is a deeper and moral shortcoming is a self-willed choice to live with untruths. (All of the parables of Christ taught us to believe in truth, not in justice.) There is no need to expatiate upon this further, except that the difference between the propagation of justice and that of truth, resulting in the difference of the prevalence of injustice and of untruth, has perhaps never been as extensive (and startling) as it is now, at the end of the Modern Age, and in the midst of our democratic age. There may be less injustice—surely of institutionalized injustice—now than ever before. The governments of many states and all kinds of legal establishments profess to dedicate themselves to the elimination of injustice: slavery, exploitation, racial and economic and social discriminations. At least superficially these practices seem to have diminished throughout the world. At the same time there hangs over the world an enormous and spreading dark cloud cover of untruths—especially in this democratic age of mass and “electronic” communications (more often than not aimed at the lowest common denominator of their recipients). And amid this often suffocating discrepancy, which is replete with the gravest of potential dangers, few are aware that the indiscriminate pursuit of justice may turn to insane lengths—indeed, that it may lay the world to waste. (Consider but some of the inhuman techniques of modern war; or the puritanical character and fate of Captain Ahab in *Moby-Dick*.)

We have seen, earlier in this chapter, that there is a difference between historical and legal evidence. But: does the historian know what *is* truth? No, he does not; yet he ought to do better than Pontius Pilate (whom I, for one, could never contemplate without at least a modicum of sympathy). When Pilate asked: “What is truth?” he also implied: “What is untruth?” The historian ought to go one better than that. He ought to see untruth for what it is. His work, really, consists of the pursuit of truth (where Pilate had stopped), often through a jungle of untruths, bushes and weeds and thickets, small and large.

But it is not as simple as that. The pursuit of truth (and the often consequent belief, “Eureka! I found it!”) is also historical—meaning that it changes through the ages. There was a time when an avowal of certain truths of

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faith amounted to a proof of one's belonging to a real community (or the reverse). This was followed by the so-called Age of Reason, when the assertion of a scientific truth became independent of any other belief (wrongly so). Yes: for God-believers Truth is God/God is Truth, which means: God is eternal. Truth is eternal. But we are not Gods but historical beings, and the fallible descendants of Adam. This has been beautifully expressed by the American Christian thinker Caryl Johnston: "There is, inescapably, an historical dimension in any truth-telling. . . . It is not that 'history' tells the truth (or disguises or determines the truth) as it is that we are ineluctably involved with history in any attempt to tell the truth." Note: *to tell the truth*.²⁰

We cannot avoid the historicity of our thinking. As Owen Barfield wrote: "One way or another, what matters is our coming to realize that the way we habitually think and perceive is not the only possible way, not even a way that has been going on very long. It is the way we have *come* to think, the way we have *come* to perceive. Habit is the end product of repeated action in the past, of prolonged behavior in the past. This is as true of mental habit as of any other. And so, if men have at last become incapable of seeing what they once saw, it is because they have gone for so a long time not looking at it."²¹

But the historicity of our seeing and speaking does *not* amount to the relativity of truth. What history gives a mind, at best, is not a dose of relativism; it gives us certain standards, the power to contrast, and the right to estimate. The belief that truth is relative is no longer the assertion merely of cynics or skeptics but of postmodern philosophers, according to whom there were and are no truths, only modes of discourse, structures of thought and of text. Their relativization of truth is absolute. And yet: truths exist. Their existence, unlike the existence of ideas, is not a matter of our choice. But we are responsible for how, and where, and why, and when we try to express them.

"Facts"—inevitably dependent on their associations and, more important, on their statements—are not truths. Their statements or expressions can come close to truths—which is the best we can expect. A "fact" is never absolute. Nor is it given to us to fix, to nail down, to state unalterably an absolute truth. We may think that our *concept* (or *idea*) of truth is absolute; yet that, too, only hearkens toward the absolute. (Our very language reflects this. "This is true" is not quite the same as: "This is *the* truth.")

Pascal: "Truth is so subtle a point that our instruments are too blunt to touch it exactly. When they do reach it, they crush the point and bear down around it, more on the false than on the true." Kierkegaard: "The pure truth is for God alone. What is given to us is the pursuit of truth." This is not relativism. (If truth does not really exist, indeed, if it is wholly relative:

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why pursue it at all?) And for believers, the sense that truths exist ought to be strengthened by the cognition (or consciousness) that the pure truth is for God alone—an existence that is independent of us and yet the potential sense of which is within us.



A little more than a century ago the English historian Lord Acton claimed that historical science had reached a stage when a history of the Battle of Waterloo could be written that would not only be perfectly acceptable to French and British and Dutch and Prussian historians but would be unchanging, perennial, and fixed. Already Acton's great contemporary John Cardinal Newman said that Acton "seems to me to expect more from History than History can furnish." And a century later we have (or at least ought to have) a more chastened and realistic perspective. Acton believed that history (very much including the history of the Church) was a supremely important matter—yes—and that the purpose of history is the definite, and final, establishment of truth—no. Just as the purpose of medicine is not perfect health but the struggle against illness, just as the purpose of law is not perfect justice but the pursuit of it through vigilance against injustice, the purpose of the historian is not the establishment of perfect truth but the pursuit of truth through a reduction of ignorance, including untruths.

There are many historians who would not find such a statement sufficiently satisfactory. They are not to be blamed for this, nor are they to be blamed for a condition which is much larger than their own profession: the intellectual and mental and spiritual crisis at the end of the Modern Age, of which the bureaucratization of intellectual professions, including historianship, is but a consequence. But they ought to be blamed for their ignorance of (or lack of interest in) an amazing condition: the relatively recent development of a spreading appetite for history in the world, something that exists contrary to so many other superficial symptoms. For this happens at a time when many people know *less* history than their parents or grandparents had known; but when *more* people are interested in history than ever before. On the one hand, less history is being required and taught in schools than earlier in the twentieth century. On the other hand there exists an appetite for history throughout the world—and perhaps particularly in the United States—that has no precedents.²² There are so many evidences of this that I can list only a few. There are history programs and history channels on television, historical films, historical "documentaries" and "docudramas," obviously responding to the interests of millions, dealing with topics that were hardly featured as late as two generations ago.

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There exist popular historical magazines, with a widespread readership. There are three times as many local historical societies in the United States as there were sixty years ago: their membership includes many younger people, not only old ladies in tennis shoes whose interests are primarily genealogical.

Of course the historical appetite of people is served, and will continue to be served, with plenty of junk food. Of that professional historians may be aware. Yet the existence of this appetite for history is ignored by many of them—and, alas, by most administrators of educational institutions.

Perhaps the most startling evidence of this appetite—perhaps more precisely: of this recent evolution of consciousness—has been the (now at least fifty-year-old) change in the relationship between history and the novel. Within commercial publishing, popular histories have been outselling novels for at least fifty years. It is now accepted that serious biographies belong to history: biographies sell quite well, while the very methods of serious biographers have become historical. Interest in history and interest in the novel developed together about 250 years ago; they were part and parcel of the then-evolving historical consciousness. That was a new phenomenon, since the novel as such hardly existed before that. The novel was not really a new version of epic in prose. It described people and events who were not mythical but real, with whom people could identify themselves in one way or another.

Then arose the historical novel, in the nineteenth century, when writers recognized that they could create more interesting stories against a rich historical background. But during the twentieth century a reverse development occurred. More and more it was not the novel that absorbed history but it was history that began to absorb the novel. So far as readership goes, we have seen that the appetite for all kinds of readers for history and for biography has risen at the same time that their appetite and interest for novels has decreased. But—significantly—more and more writers began to sense this (even as they have not recognized its meaning), experimenting with new hybrid genres that are the opposites of the old historical novel, since in their confections history is not the background but the foreground. One manifestation of this is the new hybrid thing that has the silly name of “faction.”²³

“Our time is emerging as a golden age of American history and biography,” writes the excellent historian of California, Kevin Starr. “As the American novel, in fact, has become more narrow, more internal and fragmented, more solipsistic in its inability to grasp and refract social dynamics in the manner of its [previous] masters . . . American historians and biographers have come to the fore as the providers of imaginative as well as social sci-

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entific interpretation.”²⁴ This may be especially true of biography. During the nineteenth century many professional historians, due to the largely German-inspired canons of their craft, eschewed biography. In this respect the English tradition was an exception, with enduring and widening results especially during the second half of the twentieth century (one of the few promising signs at a time of intellectual decay), to the extent that the appetite of the reading public for serious biographies is now larger than ever before, and that every serious biographer now follows the process of historical research.

Meanwhile two directions of the novel have become discernible: one tendency increasingly toward poetry, the other—more widespread and more important—toward history: and there is at least some reason to believe that sooner or later history may absorb the narrative novel almost entirely. New kinds of historical literature will of course appear—they are already appearing—including some very questionable ones. But Carlyle was probably right when he wrote, “In the right interpretation of History and Reality does genuine poetry lie.” Or Maupassant (in his preface to *Pierre et Jean*): “The aim of the realistic novelist is not to tell a story; to amuse us or to appeal to our feelings, but to compel us to reflect, and to understand the darker and deeper meaning of events.”²⁵ A historian could have written that.

More than one hundred years ago Thomas Hardy wrote:

Conscientious fiction alone it is which can excite a reflecting and thoughtful and abiding interest in the minds of thoughtful readers of mature age, who are weary of puerile inventions and famishing for accuracy; who consider that in representations of the world, the passions ought to be proportioned as in the world itself. This is the interest which was excited in the minds of the Athenians by their immortal tragedies, and in the minds of Londoners at the first performances of the finer plays of three hundred years ago.²⁶

I am convinced that *conscientious history* is now replacing that desideratum which Hardy stated as *conscientious fiction*. It is history which can excite a reflecting and abiding interest in the minds of thoughtful readers of mature age, who are weary (and how weary we are) of puerile inventions and famishing for accuracy (I should say: reality; truth).²⁷

It should now appear that I have been writing about the historicity of our knowledge, rather than about the knowledgeability of all history; in other words, eschewing a philosophy of history but asserting the nature and evidences of a historical and monistic perspective of the world. A recognition of this, coming at the end of an age, is overdue.²⁸