The linguistic turn, literary theory and historical theory

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'Cet animal est très méchant: quand on l'attaque il se défend.'

1. Introduction

In 1973 Hayden White published his by now famous *Metahistory*. The book is generally regarded as a turning point – as is most suitable for a theory on *tropology* – in the history of historical theory. And, surely, one need only be superficially aware of the evolution of historical theory since World War II in order to recognize that historical theory has become a fundamentally different discipline since the publication of White's *magnum opus*. Different question are now being asked, different aspects of historical writing are now being investigated and it would be no exaggeration to say that the kind of historical writing that that now is the object of theoretical studies is much different from the kind of history that a previous generation of historical theorists believed to be exemplary of historical writing.

We are now three decades later, and at the beginning of a new millennium, so this arguably is an appropriate moment to assess what has, and has not been achieved. In order to do so, I will mainly address the question of the relationship between the so-called linguistic turn on the one hand and the introduction of literary theory as an instrument for understanding historical writing on the other. My conclusion will be 1) that there is an asymmetry between the claims of the linguistic turn and those of literary theory, 2) that confusion between these two sets of claims has been most unfortunate from the perspective of historical theory and 3) that literary theory has a lot to teach the historian of historical writing but has no bearing on the kind of problems that are traditionally investigated by the historical theorist.

2. The linguistic turn and historical theory

The revolution effected by White in contemporary historical theory has often been related to the so-called linguistic turn. And quite rightly so since White's main thesis has been that our understanding of the past is determined not only by what the past has been like, but also by the *language* used by the historian for speaking about it – or, as

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he liked to put it himself, that historical knowledge is as much 'made' (by the historian's language) as it is 'found' (in the archives). Nonetheless, when White makes this claim he sometimes has different things in mind than the philosophers arguing for the linguistic turn. For a satisfactory appraisal of what White's revolution has done to historical theory, it will be worthwhile to identify these differences and to consider their implications.

In his influential collection of writings on the linguistic turn, Richard Rorty states:

> I shall mean by "linguistic philosophy" the view that philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use.[1]

Philosophical problems arise when, as in Wittgenstein's famous formulation, 'language goes on holiday' and begins to create a pseudo world in addition to the world that language has to deal with on its ordinary workdays. Initially this may seem to strengthen the empiricist's position: for does the linguistic philosopher's program not recommend us to dismiss all philosophical problems as illusory that are not reducible to either the construction of an ideal language (that cannot give rise to philosophical pseudo-problems) or to empirical enquiry? And is this not in agreement with empiricist orthodoxy, as formulated already by David Hume,[2] that all true belief can reduced to either empirical or analytical truth? Surely, this intuition is not wholly mistaken: one need only think of Ayer's *Language, truth and logic*[3] in order to realize that one can be both an empiricist and an advocate of the linguistic turn.

But the linguistic turn can be shown to have anti-empiricist implications at a deeper level. Empiricists and the advocates of the linguistic turn will pleasantly travel together to the station of the necessity to distinguish between speaking and speaking about speaking. Both will argue that the failure to distinguish between these two levels gave rise to the many pseudo-problems that occupied traditional philosophy. But after having reached that station each will follow its own route. The empiricist will tend to identify the distinction of these two levels with the distinction between empirical or synthetic truth (the level of 'speaking') and analytical truth (the level of 'speaking about speaking'). But here the more radical advocates of the linguistic turn will express their doubts. They will point out that this identification sins against the empiricist's own claims since it cannot be reduced to either logical truth or

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1. R. RORTY (Ed.), *The linguistic turn: recent essays in philosophical method*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1967) p. 3. See also pp. 33 ff.

2. In Hume's famous formulation: 'when we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take into our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames; for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion'. See D. HUME, *An enquiry concerning human understanding. Edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford 1972), p. 165.

3 . A.J. AYER, *Language, truth and logic* (Gollancz, London, 1948).

empirical truth – so, even on empiricist assumptions the identification should be stigmatised as a hitherto unproven 'dogma of empiricism'. And, next, they will emphasize that the identification is profoundly at odds with what we know about the course of things in the sciences: for here speaking about speaking will often be part of the acquisition of empirical knowledge. This is the procedure that Quine called 'semantic ascent'. In order to illustrate what he has in mind with this notion, he gives the following example by pointing out that 'Einstein's theory of relativity was accepted in consequence not just of reflections on time, light, headlong bodies, and the perturbations of Mercury (hence, the level of 'speaking') but of reflections on the theory itself, as discourse, and its simplicity in comparison with alternative theories (hence, the level of 'speaking about speaking').[4] And, selfevidently, Quine was not advocating here a return to pre-linguistic philosophy, since he proposes here a theory on what the 'semantic ascent' from the first to the second level may contribute to empirical knowledge – and this presupposes the distinction between the two levels that had so often been ignored by pre-linguistic philosophy.In a classic essay of 1951, 'Two dogmas of empiricism', Quine had already used the linguistic turn for a frontal attack on empiricism. The dogma in question he described as the

> belief in some fundamental cleavage between truths which are *analytic*, or grounded in meanings independent of fact, and truths which are *synthetic* or grounded in fact.[5]

The dogma in question is the empiricist claim that all true belief can be retraced to two sources of truth (i.e. firstly, what we know by empirical experience and, secondly, what we can derive by analytical deduction from true premises), 2) that there are no other sources of truth and 3) that empirical truth can always be distinguished from analytical truth. Quine objected that there are true statements that can fit either category, and that, therefore, the distinction between synthetic and analytic truth is not as watertight as empiricists like(d) to believe. For an illustration of Quine's intentions, we may think, for example, of Newton's law according to which force is the product of mass and acceleration. We might say that the statement is empirically true because it is in agreement with the observed behavior of physical objects. And then it is an empirical, or synthetic truth (to be situated on the level of 'speaking'). But we can also say that the law is a conceptual truth about the notions of force, mass and acceleration. And then it is an analytical truth since it is true because of the meaning of the concepts (to be situated on the level of 'speaking about speaking'). Summarizing the implications of Quine's argument against the synthetic/analytic distinction Rorty wrote:

> Quine's "Two dogmas of empiricism" challenged this distinction, and with it the standard notion (common to Kant, Husserl, and Russell) that philosophy stood to empirial science as the study of structure to the study of content. Given Quine's doubts (buttressed by similar doubts in

4. W.V.O. Quine, *Word and object*, (MIT Press, Cambridge (Ma), 1975), p. 272.

5. W.V.O. Quine, "Two dogmas of empiricism", in id. *From a logical point of view : (9 logico-philosophical essays*,) (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1971), p. 20.

> Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*) about how to tell when we are responding to the compulsion of "language" rather than that of "experience", it became difficult to explain in what sense philosophy had a separate "formal" field of inquiry, and thus how it might have the desired apodictic character.[6]

Hence, the crucial implication is that we cannot always be sure whether our beliefs have their origins in the 'compulsion of experience' – in what empirical reality demonstrates to be the case – or in the 'compulsion of language', so in what we believe on the basis of *apriori*, analytical or philosophical argument. This is also why one speaks of the linguistic turn: contrary to empiricist conviction, what we believe to be true can, at least sometimes, be interpreted as a statement about reality *and* as a statement about the meaning of language and of the words that we use in language. So, language can be a truth-maker no less than reality.

Now, a similar anti-empiricist argument can be defended for historical writing as well. Even more so, as we shall see in a moment, the significance of the linguistic turn is far greater for the humanities than for the sciences. Think of a study of the Renaissance or of the Enlightenment. Then, just as in the case of Newton's law, one can say of such a study two things. In the first place it could well be argued that a historical investigation of the relevant part of the past is the *empirical* basis for this specific view of the Renaissance or the Enlightenment. But it could be said equally well that this study presents us with a definition – or with the proposal of a definition – of the Renaissance or the Enlightenment. Other historians have written other books on the Renaissance or the Enlightenment and associated the Renaissance or the Enlightenment with a different set of aspects of the relevant part of the past – or, rather, with a different set of statements about the past – and this is why they came up with a different *definition* of the Renaissance or the Enlightenment. And if this is how they decide to *define* the Renaissance or the Enlightenment, then all what they have been saying about it, must be (analytically) true since what they have said about it can analytically be derived from the meaning they want to give to the terms Renaissance or Enlightenment. It is then a conceptual truth, just as Newton's law can be interpreted as a conceptual truth.

Much the same can be argued with regard to terms like 'revolution', 'social class', and probably even for such seemingly unambiguous and well-defined terms such as 'war' or 'peace'. Take 'revolution'. In his well-known *The anatomy of revolution* Crane Brinton discussed four revolutions, 'the English revolution of the 1640's, the American Revolution, the great French Revolution, and the recent – or present – revolution in Russia'.[7] As the book's title already suggests, Brinton wanted to discern some features or patterns that are shared by all revolutions. He found these shared features mainly in the fact that all of them seemed to pass from the phase of an Ancien Régime, through the reign of the moderates and the subsequent reign of the extremists to the ultimate phase of 'Thermidor'. In this way a comparative analysis of revolutions allowed Brinton to discover some empirical truths about revolutions.

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6. R. RORTY. *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1980), p. 169.
7. C. BRINTON, *The anatomy of revolution*, (Vintage Books, New York, 1965), p. 7.

However, the problem of the systematization of phenomena such as revolutions is that they seem to depend as much on what one actually finds in the past as in how one decides to define the word 'revolution'. This observation is exemplified already by Brinton's choice for the revolutions to be discussed. He thus includes the American Revolution in his set of revolutions to be analyzed, whereas for example Marxist historians will argue that this was not a revolution at all since it lacked the aspect of class-struggle that Marxists see as a *conditio sine qua non* for something to count as a revolution. If Brinton had adopted a different *definition* of the word 'revolution' he would probably have ended up with different *empirical* findings about revolutions. Next, what would Brinton do with a social conflict resembling his revolutions in all relevant respects except for the fact that it is impossible to distinguish between the reign of the moderates and that of the extremists? Would he refuse to see this social conflict to be a revolution because of this; or would he see here, instead, an occasion to reconsider his typology of revolutions? Both options seem to be open to him and this most powerfully suggests the equivalence of the compulsion of language and that of experience in this kind of social and historical analysis. Hence, in both the case of the Marxist resistance against revolutions without a class struggle and that of revolutions disconfirming Brinton's typology of revolutions, we are thrown back on the question: 'What is a revolution?'. And when historians have to deal with this kind of question issues of meaning and issues of empirical fact tend to become indistinguishable. This is, however, not a weakness of historical writing: for how to deal in case where truth *de dicto* and truth *de re* intermingle is precisely what we need historical writing for. The attempt to decide these dilemmas by sacrificing one type of truth for the other would mean the end of historical writing and rob us of an indispensable instrument for coming to a better understanding of the social world we are living in.

Even more illustrative is the following example. In his *Social origins of dictatorship and democracy*[8] Barrington Moore also develops a comparativist analysis of revolution, though an infinitely profounder one than Brinton's. In a most perceptive review Theda Skocpol discussed Barrington Moore's concept of the so-called 'bourgeois revolution' as expounded in this most magisterial treatise on revolution. She points out that for Moore bourgeois revolutions are, respectively, the Puritan Revolution of the 1640's, the French Revolution and the American Civil War. Note, that Moore, unlike Brinton, does not consider the American Revolution of 1776 to have been a 'real' revolution and grants that honour (if an honour it is) only to the Civil War. In history what is ordinarily called a revolution may, for certain historians *not* be a revolution, whereas what is ordinarily not considered a revolution may be argued by some to have been one. Next, Ms. Skocpol observes that when Barrington Moore contrasts the 'bourgeois revolution' to the fascist and the communist revolutions, he does so *not* by identifying an independent variable explaining why in some cases you get a bourgeois revolution (and in others a fascist or communist revolution), but by merely looking at the *results* of revolutions. That is, by observing

8 . The complete title is: *Social origins of dictatorship and democracy: Lord and peasant in the making of the modern world* (Penguin Books, London, 1967).

whether a revolution ends up by being a bourgeois, or by being a communist or a fascist revolution. It is as if you were saying that something is an apple or a pear, when it proves to be an apple or a pear, without making clear what makes an apple into an apple and a pear into a pear. Naming then begins to functioning as a quasi-explanatory procedure, for an unexplained choice of what should be named as a bourgeois revolution is then the basis for explaining the nature of revolutions. And Skocpol therefore correctly concludes that what Barrington Moore did here "suffers from *interrelated* logical and empirical difficulties".[9] Even more outspoken is the Dutch philosopher of history Chris Lorenz (who is, by the way, no less sympathetic with regard to Moore's comparative method than Skocpol) when he writes that Moore's generalization about 'bourgeois revolutions' are *conceptual* rather than *empirical* truths.[10]

In agreement with the foregoing, I would like to emphasize that there is nothing necessarily wrong with this. For in historical writing we will sometimes find ourselves (whether we like it or not) on this level where we cannot distinguish between truths *de dicto* and truths *de re*. At this level decisions are made that will determine to a large extent how we see the past. The kind of criteria that are decisive here are not reducible to questions of truth or falsity – for it is, essentially, a decision about what set of truths we shall prefer to some other set of truths when we are looking for the best account of the relevant part(s) of the past. Truth is here not the arbiter of the game but its stake, so to say.

Other criteria than truth and falsity will then have to be relied upon – and it is an empiricist superstition to believe that no such criteria can be conceived of and that then all has been given up to prejudice, irrationality and arbitrariness. For, as is suggested by both the example of Newton's law or of how we should see the Renaissance or the Enlightenment, the fact that Newton's law or statements on the Renaissance or the Enlightenment can be construed as being either empirically or analytically true, does not in the least imply that we could not give good (or bad) arguments in favor of our views on Newton's law or for a specific conception of the Renaissance or the Enlightenment. Historical debate is sufficient proof of the fact that there *are* rational criteria, other than the truth criterion, that we can appeal to when we have moved to this level. It may well be that it is not so easy to identify these criteria for rational historical discussion, but it would be most 'irrational' to see in this unfortunate fact sufficient reason for simply dropping the search for these criteria.[11] The empiricist's unwillingness to recognize other criteria than the truth criterion must therefore remind us of the blind man who argues that there could not be a table in this room since *he* is unable to see it.

Thus, as will have become clear from the foregoing, from whatever angle we decide to look at the linguistic turn, it can never be construed as an attack on truth, or as a

9. (My italics used in quotation). *See* T. SKOCPOL, A critical review of Barrington Moore's Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy, *Politics and Society* 74(4) 1973, p. 14. See also pp. 5, 6.

10. C. LORENZ, *Konstruktion der Vergangenheit. Eine Einführung in die Geschichtstheorie*, (Böhlau Verlag Cologne, 1997), p. 273.

11. For a discussion of the nature of these criteria, see section 4.

license for relativism. For the linguistic turn does not question truth in any way but exclusively the standard empiricist account of the distinction between empirical and analytical truth. Hence, if so many historical theorists are inclined to read into the linguistic turn an argument in favor of what they refer to as 'linguistic relativism', we should not follow them in this. As is made clear by the linguistic turn, the fact that there may be different 'languages' for speaking about historical reality is no less an argument in favor of historical relativism than the fact that we can describe the world in English, French, German or Japanese. Of course, it may well be that the meaning of words in these different languages do not always correspond exactly to each other – and though this undeniable fact may give rise to the difficult problem of translation from one language to another *salva veritate*,[12] it cannot be construed as an argument against the possibility of expressing truth in any of these languages.

This would only be thinkable on the Russellian assumption that there is only one language – i.e. the language of science – that would allow us to express truth. Nonetheless, it may well be that certain historical languages more easily give us access to truth than others. And it might be added 1) that a discussion about the appropriateness of these languages is part of what goes on in historical debate and 2) that, as the foregoing has made clear, such discussions, to be situated on the level of 'speaking about speaking' should not be reduced to the only level that the empiricist is willing to recognize.

We observed a moment ago that the linguistic turn has its significance for both the sciences and for history. But it cannot be doubted that its significance is far greater for history than for the sciences. For the indeterminacy of truth by experience and truth by the compulsion of language will increase to the extent that it will be more difficult to pin down what part of language corresponds to what chunk of reality. The less room there is for uncertainties in this correspondence, the less will we encounter the indeterminacy identified by the linguistic turn. Now, the success of the sciences undoubtedly has to a large extent its explanation in its unequalled capacity to manage reference; that is, to define the meaning of its words and concepts in experiential terms, or at least in terms of what investigated (physical) reality shows to be the case. Put differently, if we recall Frege's distinction between 'Sinn' and 'Bedeutung', between meaning and reference, the sciences can be said to have been eminently successful in excessively expanding the dimension of 'Bedeutung' at the expense of 'Sinn' (though even in the sciences the former dimension will, or could never be wholly absent). It follows that in the sciences the ascendancy of the compulsion of experience over that of language will be far more pronounced than in the humanities. What happens on the level of language, what definitions are either explicitly or implicitly proposed there, the web of associations determining meaning, will contribute far more to knowledge in the humanities than in the sciences. Science has an elective affinity with the level of 'speaking' and historical writing with that of 'speaking about speaking'.

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12. A problem that we will certainly have to face in historical discussion insofar as historical discussion could be describes as a conflict between different historical 'languages' (or vocabularies). But dealing with this issue falls outside the scope of the present essay.

But this does not in the least imply that we have any reason to be sceptical with regard to historical writing and discussion from the perspective of truth (as both the defenders and the detractors of the linguistic turn in historical theory are in the habit of arguing). The only legitimate inference permitted by the linguistic turn is that in history truth may have its origins in the compulsions of language no less than in those of experience. The empiricist tends to commit this mistake and to be alarmed by the alleged relativist implications of the linguistic turn because of his belief that the compulsion of experience is the only constraint on our way to true and reliable knowledge that has to be taken into account – and, indeed, if one embraces this prejudice (and, this is nothing but a prejudice), then it would follow that historical writing floats aimlessly on the seas of relativism and of moral and political bias. (Just as the Cartesian seeing in Reason the only reliable source of truth is likely to condemn the empiricist's trust in empirical findings as the death-blow to sound scientific inquiry.) But as soon as we also make room for the compulsions of language, and for the constraints of a meaningful use of language, then there is no reason at all for such dramatic and overhasty condemnations of historical writing.

I am well aware that these optimist comments on historical writing will be regarded by most people as profoundly counter-intuitive. Surely, they will argue, truth is more easily attainable in the sciences than in historical writing with its endless disputes, its *dialogues des sourds*, its frequent misunderstandings and its clumsy and often ill-focussed discussions. They will see in these, admittedly distressing features of historical debate both sign and proof of how much more difficultly truth is achieved in history than in the sciences. And, as it seems to follow, if the trajectory to truth apparently is so much longer and so much more arduous in history than elsewhere, what other conclusion is open to us than that the historian ordinarily lingers in places where truth is not to be found and in the doubtful company of the enemies of truth?

But though we have every reason to agree with this lamentation about the daily discomforts of historical debate, we should not accept the diagnosis on which it is founded. For truth is simply not at stake here. In order to explain this, we had best return to my example of books on the Renaissance or on the Enlightenment. As the protagonist of the linguistic turn will argue, the debate on the Renaissance will mainly be a debate on how the Renaissance had best be *defined* (in terms of the description(s) that a historian may give of the relevant part and aspects of fourteenth and fifteenth century Italian civilization). And what is *then* said about fifteenth and sixteenth century Italian civilization is, admittedly, true *by definition* - but *true* it is. For the logical structure of such an account of the Renaissance essentially is that all, and only all the statements that a historian has been using for describing the Renaissance add up to the lengthy and complex manner in which the historian in question proposes to define the Renaissance. Put differently, *each* historical account of the Renaissance is true since it can logically be derived from how the historian in question proposes to define the Renaissance. And truth thus is not at stake in the disagreement about such definitions – what is at stake, is what truths are *more helpful* for grasping the nature of the period in question than others. Similarly, we can not use truth as the criterion that may enable us decide whether we should define the human being as a featherless

biped or as creature endowed with reason – and which of the two definitions is the more useful one, will depend on what type of conversation about human nature we wish to engage in.

But I repeat, this does not in the least exclude the possibility of a meaningful discussion of how we could best define the Renaissance. A certain definition of the Renaissance may teach us more about what is of interest in Italian civilization in the relevant period than some rival definition. And one may have good and convincing arguments for preferring one such definition to other(s). Once again, the discussions that may arise with regard to the question how best to define the Renaissance cannot be decided by having recourse to truth-conditions. For, in a way, they are *all* true; and this may make clear why the truth criterion is so helpless here. Truth is not decisive here, but the question what definition of the Renaissance is most successful in meaningfully interrelating as many different aspects of the period in question.

3. Description and representation

We may rephrase the foregoing in terms of the distinction between description and representation. On the face of it the distinction between the two seems to have no real theoretical significance: for both terms are suggestive of a true account of part of reality. And this might invite us to see the terms 'description' and 'representation' as being more or less synonymous. But if we look more closely some interesting differences will present themselves.

As I have discussed elsewhere,[13] the most notable logical difference between the two is the following. In a description, such as 'this cat is black' we can always distinguish a part that refers – 'this cat' – and a part attributing a certain property to the object referred to – 'is black' in my example. No such distinction is possible in a representation of the black cat, in a picture or photograph of it. We cannot pinpoint with absolute precision on the picture those parts of it that exclusively refer to the black cat (as is being done by the subjectterm in the description) and those other parts of it that attribute to it certain properties – such as being black- as is done by the predicative part of the description. *Both* things, both reference and predication, take place at one and the same time in pictures.

And so it is with historical writing. Suppose, once again, that we have a historical text on the Renaissance and are reading a chapter, paragraph or individual sentence on Renaissance painting. Should we say, then, that this chapter, paragraph or sentence refers to the Renaissance in the sense of exclusively picking out some historical object, or part of the past to which elsewhere in the text certain properties are attributed? Or should we say, instead, that the chapter, paragraph or sentence attributes a property to an object that has been identified elsewhere. And, if so, where and how has this object been identified? If so, what enables us to distinguish it from other closely related objects such as Mannerism or the Baroque? All questions that are impossible

13. F.R. Ankersmit, "Texts and pictures", in F.R. ANKERSMIT and H. KELLNER (Eds.), *The new philosophy of history*, (Reaktion Books, London, 1995), and id., "Representation as the representation of experience", *Metaphilosophy 31* (2000), pp. 148 -169.

to answer. And this is not merely a matter of history being an inexact science and where absolute precision with regard to reference is unattainable. For this is really is an issue of principle. And the principle in question is that in the writing of history, and in the historical text, reference and attribution always go together.

But this not all yet. It might be objected that the mere fact that reference and predication go together in (pictorial and historical) representation by no means excludes the possibility that reference and predication are both achieved by representation. Surely, a picture or photograph of this cat *refers* to this cat and also *attributes* to it the property of being black – and, similarly does not a book on the Renaissance *refer* to certain aspects of the past while, admittedly, at the same time attributing certain properties to it? The fact that both operations are being done at one and the same time by representation is certainly an interesting observation on the nature of representation, so the objection might go on, but this amounts to no more than the pedestrian observation that there is a regrettable vagueness in representation if contrasted to its more sophisticated counterpart, i.e. description. But this would be an underestimation of representation and of its complexities: representation is far more than a mere tentative and imperfect halfway station between reality and the certainties of true description.

For let us for sake of the argument grant for a moment that a text on the Renaissance 'refers' to the past. We should then ask what exactly the text refers to. And here disagreement will arise. For different texts, written by different historians will 'refer' to different things. Burckhardt's Renaissance differs from the Renaissance that Michelet, Baron, Huizinga, Burdach, Goetz, Brandi or Wölfflin had in mind14. And these differences are not mere uncertainties occasioned by the lack of precision peculiar to historical writing. For it is in these differences and these uncertainties that all historical thinking and all of historical understanding articulates itself. We would have no historical discussion and no progression in historical understanding if everybody knew what the Renaissance was and what the term did and did not refer to. Surely, there is a certain historical period, a certain civilization in a certain country that we will all associate when hearing the phrase 'the Renaissance'. But though this is a necessary condition, it is an insufficient condition for fixing reference.

In order to bring this out and to avoid confusion we should therefore look for an alternative term and avoid using the term 'reference' for designating the relationship between the word 'Renaissance' and that part of past reality we associate with it. I propose to that end the term 'being about'. Doing so would result in the following terminological distinction. Though both descriptions and representations stand in a relationship with reality, a description will be said to *refer* to reality (by means of its subject-term), whereas a representation (as a whole) will be said to *be about* reality. And where 'reference' is fixed objectively, i.e. by an object in reality denoted by the subject-term of the description, 'being about' is essentially unstable and unfixed because it is in the case of each representation differently defined by the descriptions

14. For a brilliant exposition of these differences, see H. SCHULTE NORDHOLT, *Het beeld der Renaissance*, (Querido, Amsterdam, 1948).

contained by the text. That does not imply that we should be desperate about representation and lament the absence of the certainties of description and of reference. For 'being about' gives us the 'logical space' within which historical thinking and historical discussion is possible; where 'reference' takes the place of 'being about' historical understanding withers away and science takes over. The discussion of what set of descriptions (as embodied in a representation) would best represent a chunk of reality is then exchanged for a discussion of what predicates are true of reality.

This may clarify why the linguistic turn, as discussed in the previous section, is so essential for a correct understanding of historical writing. I referred to Quine's notion of 'semantic ascent', which was defined as a discourse in which the level of 'speaking' and that of 'speaking about' begin to intermingle. It is, as we have seen, in the fusion of these two levels that this indeterminacy of the 'compulsion of language' and 'the compulsion of experience' that so much interests the advocate of the linguistic turn announces itself. And it is precisely in this fusion of 'speaking' and 'speaking about' where historical understanding and historical debate should be located. For on the one hand the historical text contains the level of 'speaking' (i.e. the level where the historian describes the past in terms of individual statements about historical events, states of affairs, caaual links etc.). But on the other it *also* comprises the level where the discussion takes place about what chunk of language (i.e. what historical text) represents best, or corresponds best to some chunk of past reality. This is the level of 'speaking about speaking' and where we may, for example, ask ourselves what *definition* we had best give of the concept 'Renaissance', or 'revolution', in order to come to an optimal understanding of a certain part of the past. Before proceeding further it will be helpful to answer an obvious objection. It might now be suggested that I have elevated in all this a merely practical problem into a theoretical one. The practical problem is that 'things' such as the Renaissance or the French revolution are not so easy to identify as, for example, the Statue of Liberty or the Eiffel tower. But this is a mere difference in degree and not in principle. And it would follow that there is no need to introduce fine logical distinctions when we move from *descriptions* of the Statue of Liberty to *representations* of, say, the Renaissance. For description and representation are similar from a logical point of view – and it is only because the Renaissance is such a far more complex object in the world's inventory than the Statue of Liberty that we happen to prefer the word representation in the former, and the word description in the latter case. Moreover, so the objection might go on, think of pictorial representation; for example, of the photograph or picture of the black cat that was discussed above. Is the represented, the black cat, not an objectively given for us so that we can assess the adequacy of its pictorial representation in much the same way that we can decide about the truth or falsity of descriptions such as 'this cat is black'? Is this in both cases not merely a question of correctly identifying the object of description or representation and of establishing, next, whether what is said about the object in question corresponds or not to what we see?

I shall not say that there is no truth in this view: in the next section I shall explain where it is right and wrong when discussing certain types of statements suggesting a kind of gliding scale between description and representation. But for the moment I

wish to point out that even in the case of pictorial representation the issue may be more complicated than in that of the photograph of the black cat.

Think of portrait painting. When the painter paints a portrait, we tend to believe that he depicts a reality that is objectively, or inter-subjectively given to us (just as when the photographer makes his picture of the black cat). For the sitter presents to the painter his physical presence, and it may seem that no disagreement can exist about its exact nature. He must seem the same to any painter, and to just anybody carefully looking at him. But observe, next, that if a person is painted by different painters, we will get as many different paintings, or representations of the sitter as there have been painters painting him. Our initial reaction to this state of affairs will be that some paintings are more accurate, and approach accurate description more closely than others. An intuition, by the way, that would most counterintuitively confer on photography the honour of being the ultimate touchstone of artistic excellence. So precisely this should warn us. For we all know well that we do not judge portraits (exclusively) on the basis of their photographic accuracy. A good portrait should, before all, give us the personality of the person represented.

However, this personality is just as little an objective given as the nature of the Renaissance or of the French Revolution (i.e. the examples of historical representation we dealt with a moment ago). So, in both cases, in that of the portrait and of that of historical writing, we are faced with a movement from an (intersubjective) surface down into ever deeper layers.[15] Our assessement of a portrait may well start with the criterion of photographic accuracy, but from there it will move on into ever deeper levels giving us access to the sitter's personality. And much the same is true in historical writing. As (a sum of) description(s) the historical text should be unexceptionable. This is the 'surface', so to say. But a historical text giving us correct descriptions of the past is not sufficient: the text should also give us the 'personality' of the period (or aspect of it) with which it deals. And, just as with the photograph, as soon as we have broken through the surface of what is intersubjectively given, and as soon as we have thus entered into the deeper levels of reality, there is no obvious (and intersubjectively given) mark where we should stop. It is inviting us to penetrate ever deeper. Yet *somewhere* we will have to stop: in both painting and historiography, from a certain moment further penetration will give us less instead of more. And, once again, this is a constraint that has its only origin and scope of action at the level of representation: reality itself does not provide us with criteria for this kind of representative consistency, nor for how to apply them.

The crucial implication of all this is the following. We should be wary of the common intuition about representation as a variant of description, suggesting that the represented is intersubjectively given in exactly the same way to us all if only we take care to look in the right direction. The intuition is correct only or for the 'surface' of

15. This may serve as an answer to the objection made by Zammito that there is an asymmetry between pictorial and historical representation that is insufficiently appreciated in my proposal to use pictorial representation as a means to clarify the nature of historical representation. *See* J. ZAMMITO, "Ankersmit's Postmodernist Historiography: The Hyperbole of 'Opacity'" in *History and Theory* 37(3), October 1998, p. 341.

what we see. But as soon as we want to look reality deeper in the eyes, it becomes an opaque and multi-layered reality whose layers lose themselves in darkness and obscurity when we go on to move ever deeper into it, downwards from its 'public' surface. And this is not an ontological pronouncement about the nature of reality, but on how representation makes us perceive it. Representation makes reality unfold itself into this infinity of different layers; and reality itself meekly adapts itself to whatever decisions we make here. This insight into the nature of representation can be explained if we recognize that all representation has to satisfy certain rules, criteria or standards for scale, coherence and consistency; and these rules etc. all live their life exclusively in the world of represenation and not in that of the represented. Only representations can be 'coherent' or 'consistent', it makes as little sense to speak of a 'coherent reality' as of a 'true reality'. But at the level of representation, these rules etc. are indispensable. For example, when painting a landscape the painter cannot paint the rind of individual trees into the greatest detail while, at the same reducing the staffage on the foregound to a mere suggestive smear. And, as Haskell Fain already most acutely observed some thirty years ago, much the same is true for the writing of history.[16] Hence, the representation itself is tied to certain layers, so to say. Not everything is possible here.

Once again, this has nothing to do with truth. For a painting or historical text ignoring these rules, criteria or standards for representative coherence and consistency does not invite us to hold mistaken beliefs about reality. A historian who begins with correctly informing his readers about the GNP of Britain in 1867 and then goes on to tell us about mental processes in Charles Darwin's mind in 1863 does not sin against the requirement to tell the truth about the past; we will accuse him, instead, of presenting us with an incoherent historical narrative. And a historical theory insensitive to this dimension of the writing of history and intimating that all theoretical problems about historical writing can ultimately be rephrased as problems about truth, is as helpless and defective as an aesthetics arguing that photographic accuracy is all we need in order to assess the merits of the pictorial representation of reality.

The upshot of these considerations is that there exists in representation a correspondence between the represented and its representation that does not have its counterpart or equivalent in description. Description does not know these constraints of coherence and consistency that inevitably enter the scene as soon as we move from simple description to the complexities of representation. There is, thus, something peculiarly 'idealist' about representation, in the sense that how we decide to conceptualize reality on the level of representation (of reality) determines what we will find on the level of the represented (i.e. on that of reality itself). Though this should *not* be taken to mean that thought or representation actually 'makes', or 'creates' reality – as, admittedly, some extremist deconstructivists or narrativists are in the habit of saying – but only that a decision with regard to the former level will determine what we shall find on the second level. Nevertheless, the suggestion of idealism is reinforced by the fact that reality (or the represented) will remain a chaos

16. H. FAIN, *Between history and philosophy*, (Princeton University Press, Princeton 1973).

as long as no such decision has been made and no level of representation has been singled out for ordering this chaos. In this sense, and *only* in this sense can the pseudo-idealist claim be defended that representation determines the represented. Put differently, the contours of reality, though not reality *itself*, can only be defined if it is represented by a representation. To force a decision as to whether these contours have their origin in reality or in the mind is just as useless and misleading a question as the question whether America existed before people started to use the proper name 'America'. In a certain sense, yes, but in an other, no – and we should acquiesce in this ambiguity.

Finally, the linguistic turn is not only to be associated with a claim about the distinction between analytical and synthetic truths but also with a philosophical method. The philosophical method in question is that many, if not all, philosophical problems can be solved, or rather be dissolved, by a careful analysis of the language in which these problems were stated. In one word, language may mislead us and it is the linguistic philosopher's task to show where language has led us astray. From this methodological point of view the linguistic turn has another lesson to teach us about the differences between description and representation, and between 'reference' and 'being about'. From a grammatical point of view there is no difference between the statement 'this cat is black' and the statement 'the Renaissance is the birth of the modern mind'. And this has led many (empiricist) philosophers into mistakenly believing that the logic of these two statements is identical as well. However, in contrast to what grammatical similarity suggests, the logic of the latter (type of) statement is highly complex if properly analyzed. The statement is ambiguous and, next, each of its two meanings possesses different layers of meaning.

With regard to ambiguity, in the first place the statement may refer to no representation of the Renaissance in particular but merely express what is regarded as more or less the common denominator in what people will customarily associate with the phrase 'the Renaissance'. Let us assume – as is a reasonable thing to do – that there is such a common denominator. In that case the subject-term of the statement will refer to this common denominator and the question whether the statement correctly describes this common denominator will decide about its truth or falsity. Next, this common denominator is, obviously, a representation of part of the past (though probably a severely truncated one). As such it can unproblematically be said to 'be about' the past (in the sense that I have been using this term). But this is not all. If there really is some such common denominator – hence a substantial overlap in how all speakers will use the word Renaissance (and that may be summarized in the view that the Renaissance gave us the birth of modernity) – the statement will be analytically true, since it merely expresses what is already part of the (accepted) meaning of the phrase 'the Renaissance'. This is, then, where the statement will differ from a synthetic truth such as 'this cat is black', in spite of the grammatical similarities between the two of them. But on the other hand it will now share with synthetic truth the capacity to 'refer' to reality. For if all speakers will relate the same (set of) word(s) to the same aspects of reality, then the aspects in question will coagulate into the *thing*

that we can 'refer' to by means of this (set of) word(s).[17] So here 'being about' will shade off into 'reference' – but even *this* makes the statement not into a descriptive one. For whereas descriptions are synthetically true or false, this one is analytically true or false, depending on whether it has correctly expressed the (common denominator of the) meaning(s) of the phrase 'the Renaissance', or not.[18]

But in the second place the statement 'the Renaissance is the birth of modernity' may be the summary into one sentence of some quite specific representation of the Renaissance. The apodictic character of the statement will then reflect or express the speaker's agreement with this specific representation. In this way the statement expresses what Russell had somewhat enigmatically called the speaker's 'propositional attitude': i.e. the speaker believes that the representation of the Renaissance in question is a sensible, believable or plausible etc. one. Assuming that the speaker knows what he is talking about, the statement will be analytically true since in this case what is predicated to the Renaissance will be true on the basis of the meaning that the representation in question proposes to grant to the phrase 'the Renaissance'. It follows as a matter of course that in this case the subject term of the statement does not 'refer' to, nor even 'is about' (some part of past) reality. But the propositional attitude of the speaker is such that he believes the representation in question to be a sensible, believable or plausible etc. one (and he may, or may not have good reasons for this belief – but that is not the issue in the present context).

Or, put differently, he believes that the representation in question is the best way for coupling language (a text) to (a specific part or aspect of historical) reality. From this perspective the statement is to be situated on the level of 'speaking about speaking': it is an (implicit) pronouncement on how we should speak about reality, about what chunk of language had best correspond to what chunk of reality. But all this can, of course, only be justified on the basis of what is said about the past on the level of 'speaking', i.e. on the level of what the individual descriptions contained by the representation in question assert about the past. In this way the statement in question involves both 'being about' (i.e. the representational level that is to be identified with the specific historical text that the statement's subject-term 'refers' to) and 'reference' (both in so far as the subject-term of the statement 'refers' to a representation *and* in so far as reference is made to *past reality* by means of the subject-terms of the descriptions contained by the representation). Now, all these subtle, but necessary distinctions are wholly lost when one brutally and bluntly lumps together (with the empiricist) description (and 'reference') and representation (and 'being about') on no

17. For an analysis of this account of historical ontology and 'on what there is' in historical reality, see my *Narrative logic. A semantic analysis of the historian's language*, (The Hague 1983) pp. 155 - 169. See also C. LORENZ, Can Histories Be True? Narrativism, Positivism, and the 'Metaphorical Turn'" , *History and Theory* 37(3) October 1998, p. 311, note 5) which gives a short summary of the idea.

18. In order to obviate the objection that my use here of the distinction between synthetic and analytical truth is is at odds with Quine's attack on what he had labelled 'the first dogma of empiricism', I remind the reader that Quine was not arguing against the meaning of the terms 'analytical' and 'synthetic truth', but against the empiricist's claim that each truth is (reducible to) either of these two.

other basis than the grammatical similarities of statements like 'this cat is black' and 'the Renaissance is the birth of modernity'. All that makes the writing of history into the fascinating discipline that it is and where, moreover, the discipline of history still has to teach contemporary philosophy of language a lesson or two, are then lost from sight. This will be elaborated into greater detail in the next section.

No less should one avoid the other extreme and project on descriptions what exclusively belongs to the nature of representation – as has recently been done by Berkhofer in his last book.[19] For then even the simplest descriptive statements are presented as having the same indeterminacy with regard to past reality as we have claimed for the level of representation. And the result ordinarily is a secpticism just as bottomless as it is absurd. But, as the foregoing will have made clear, we should steer a prudent middle course between on the one hand the empiricist attempt to put all historical representation on the Procrustean bed of description and Derridean exaggerations on the other. Certainly the empiricist is right in much of what he finds objectionable or even ridiculous in the orgiastic cult of the word of Derridian deconstructivism. Certainly the deconstructivist is right when arguing against the empiricist that language has its own contribution to make to historical understanding. So, to a certain extent both are right, but to exactly that same extent both are wrong as well. We should therefore invest our intellectual energy in exploring the *juste milieu* between the Scylla and Carybdis of empiricism and Derridian deconstructivism. And this we can do by granting to both description (and 'reference') and to representation (and 'being about') what is due to them, while at the same time recognizing the limitations of each. But, unfortunately, contemporary historical theory has a stubborn penchant for extremism that effectively bars the way for an intelligent and fruitful compromise.

Let me conclude this section with emphasizing that the indeterminacy that has been claimed for the relationship between historical language and historical reality does not in the least oblige us to cut through all the ties between both. In the individual descriptive statements of a representation reference is made to past events etc.; a representation, as a whole, 'is about' part of a specific past reality. But 'being about' must be distinguished from 'reference' since the indeterminacy in the relationship between language and reality characteristic of representation is absent in the case of reference. And both should be distinguished from the formal correspondence between a specific historical representation (language) and what it represents (reality), that will be more closely investigated in the final section of this essay. Lastly, above all one should avoid confusing 'indeterminacy' with 'arbitrariness', for all of historical discussion and the very possibility of a rational argument about how to link historical language to historical reality most satisfactorily, both presuppose and require the 'logical space' opened up by this indeterminacy.

19. R. BERKHOFER, *Beyond the great story, history as text and as discourse*, (Hardvard University Press, Cambridge (Ma.) 1995).

4. Against the empiricists

In his excellent survey of contemporary historical theory of a few years ago Munslow distinguishes between the reconstructionist, the constructionist and the deconstructionist approach to historical knowledge. The reconstructionist maintains a 'foundational belief in empiricism and historical meaning', constructionism refers to the socio-scientific approach to history while the deconstructionist

> accepts that the content of history, like that of literature, is defined as much by the nature of language used to describe and to interpret that content as it is by research into the documentary sources.[20]

As will be obvious from this grouping of theorists, the main disagreement concerns whether one holds one (variant of) undiluted empiricism, or not. Deconstructionists (at least the more sensible amongst them) recognize that *both* the compulsion of experience *and* the compulsion of language have their role to play in historical understanding, whereas the empiricists (either reconstructionist or constructionist) allow *only* the compulsion of experience. This situation implies that the onus of proof lies with the empiricists. For they should demonstrate that all the cases where the deconstructionist will be likely to appeal to the compulsion of language is ultimately reducible to the compulsion of experience. So, instead of vociferously accusing the deconstructionist of an irresponsible irrationalism (by which the empiricists try to hide their theoretical nakedness), the empiricist had better make clear how the many theoretical and practical differences between history and the sciences can be explained without jeopardizing their empiricism.

A striking example is the sentence with which Richard Evans ends his denunciation of what he indiscriminately lumps together as 'postmodernist' historical theory. After having enumerated a few postmodernist authors and after having tied them to one-sentence summaries of their views, he goes on to write:

> I will look humbly at the past and say despite them all: it really happened, and we really can, if we are very scrupulous and careful and self-critical, find out how it happened and reach some tenable thought always less than final conclusions about what it all meant.[21]

One is reminded here of the anecdote of Samuel Johnson's 'rejection' of Berkeley's idealism when he kicked a stone and then declared this to be the irrefutable proof that objective reality exists. But most striking in this final sentence of the book is its peculiar mixture of arrogance and modesty. On the one hand, it is arrogantly claimed that truth about the past is attainable (if only one is careful and self-critical), but on the other, in the same breath truth is most modestly declared to be unattainable with the casual and seemingly innocuous concession that one will reach always only 'less than final conclusions'. Evans is strangely insensitive to the harsh opposition between his confidence in our being able 'to find out how it happened' on the one hand and our incapacity to reach 'final conclusions about what it all meant' – and that in one and the

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20. D. MUNSLOW, *Deconstructing history*, (Routledge, New York, 1997), pp. 18, 19.

21. R.J. EVANS, *In defence of history*, (Routledge, London, 1997) p. 253.

same sentence! Furthermore, he apparently never felt compelled to consider the intriguing problem of these endless disputes in historical writing about such most peculiar 'things' as the Renaissance or the French Revolution and that never go beyond 'less than final conclusions'.

What Professor Evans has probably never gathered from his short and perfunctory incursion in the strange country of historical theory is that here lies the inspiration of most, if not of all of historical theory. For this is precisely what has always fascinated the more serious and intelligent historical theorists: how is it possible that on the one hand we know so much about the past, whereas, on the other, historical writing is 'a discussion without end', as Pieter Geyl famously put it? This is what the empiricist has never explained in a satisfactory way, nor even cared to try to explain. Professor Evans's mixture of arrogance and modesty can also be discerned in more sophisticated empiricist attacks on the position that I have defended here. Though Professor Zammito may not consider himself to be an empiricist, since he speaks with much sympathy about hermeneutics, nevertheless it is an empiricist argument that he marshals against my position when commenting on the following quote from a text by Carlo Ginzburg:

> instead of dealing with the evidence as an open window, contemporary skeptics regard it as a wall, which by definition precludes any access to reality. This extreme antipositivistic attitude, which considers all referential assumptions as a theoretical naiveté, turns out to be a sort of inverted positivism. Theoretical naiveté and theoretical sophistication share a common, rather simplistic assumption: they both take for granted the relationship between evidence and reality'.[22]

I must confess that I fail to see why the contemporary skeptic, as described by Ginzburg, should be guilty of an 'inverted positivism'; but maybe I simply misunderstand what he means with this circumscription. But apart from this, I find this a somewhat puzzling statement and it is unclear to me what bearing it could possibly have on the debate between 'postmodernists' and empiricists. All that Ginzburg is talking about here is the relationship between historical reality and historical evidence. I cannot recall any discussion occasioned by 'postmodernist' historical theory where this has, or should have been an issue. Discussions always focussed on the relationship between the historical language (or the text *tout court*) on the one hand and past reality on the other.

But perhaps Ginzburg wishes to take 'postmodernists' to task for their neglect of the issue of evidence. If so, who would wish to disagree with him? For everybody can rightly be criticized for not discussing what he does not discuss (though following this strategy may easily turn intellectual debate into a most tedious and unproductive *dialogue des sourds*). But if it has been Ginzburg's intention to criticize the postmodernist for irresponsibly framing the relationship between historical language and historical reality into something else than the relationship between evidence and

22. J. ZAMMITO, "Ankersmit's Postmodernist Historiography: The Hyperbole of 'Opacity'" in *History and Theory* 37(3), October 1998, p. 343.

historical reality, then I cannot agree with him. For the latter issue is largely irrelevant to the former one. The latter *could* only have any such relevance for the former on the assumption that historical evidence *dictates* what representation the historian should propose about the past. Only on the basis of this assumption it would follow that nothing of any interest happens on the trajectory from evidence to the text, whereas all that really matters takes place on the trajectory between past reality and historical evidence. This would oblige us to postulate a complete fusion of the level of evidence and that of representation. But that would amount to an empiricism so utterly primitive that I would only reluctantly dare to ascribe it to any person in his right senses. It would, for example, justify speculations about the possibility of computer programs that would reduce all of historical writing to a mere press on the button after all the relevant evidence has been fed into the computer. All this is too absurd to be in need of further discussion.

Nonetheless one can understand why empiricists might feel attracted to this idea. For if one sees, with the empiricist, in historical writing only description and no representation, it may seem that evidence (that can be used for justifying true descriptions of the past) is all that there is to historical writing. And then one may be tempted to believe that the kind of relationship existing between true description and what is described is the logical matrix of the relationship between all of historical writing and the past. Statements such as Zammito's 'there remains a referentiality about which historical practice seeks to be lucid' or 'while it is certainly the case that textuality always transmutes its referent, it does not follow that it annihilates it'[23] are then to be expected. And the result is the same peculiar mixture of arrogance and modesty that we already noted in Evans's account. For on the one hand there is a passive submission to what evidence may teach us about the past, while at the other it is arrogantly claimed, or suggested that absolute and final truth can be attained on the basis of this evidence. As we saw a moment ago Ginzburg accused 'postmodernism' of an intriguing 'inverted positivism'. The same criticism has been levelled against White and me by Chris Lorenz:

> when we look at the metaphorical turn in narrative writing of history in its opposition to this brand of positivism we can observe an interesting feature: the type of narrativism defended by White and Ankersmit represents the simple *negation* or *reversal* of the traditional positivistic view.[24]

Thus Lorenz in a section in his essay entitled 'Narrativism as inverted positivism' and later on he writes in the same section

> empiricism also shows up in White's and Ankersmit's representation of historical research.[25]

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23. *Ibid.*
24. C. Lorenz, "Can Histories Be True? Narrativism, Positivism, and the 'Metaphorical Turn'" in *History and Theory* 37(3) October 1998, p. 313.
25. *Ibid.,* p. 316.

Now, to begin with, I was not a little disconcerted when finding myself critized in this way by a self-professed empiricist or positivist historical theorist. Apparently the empiricist philosopher of history is an opponent who is extremely difficult to please; for even if you agree with him, you should not expect this to make him happy but, instead, to be brushed aside with a cantankerous remark. I myself cherish a far more sunny attitude towards my discussion-partners. So when Lorenz, after having lengthily explained how and why metaphor sins against his own empiricists standards, suddenly begins to sing the praises of metaphor at the end of his essay, I can only openly and unashamedly rejoice in this rapprochement between him and me.[26]

The inverted positivism of narrativism is explained by Lorenz as follows:

> this opposition between literal metaphorical language – presupposed in positivism – is retained in "metaphorical" narrativism in an inverted form: now descriptive statements are treated as mere information, hardly worth the philosopher's attention, and metaphorical language is upgraded to the real thing. Consequently, epistemology and aesthetics trade places in philosophy of history as well: epistemology – up till then regarded as the bread and butter of analytical philosophy of history – is thrown out and aesthetics takes its place.[27]

There is a great deal of rhetoric in this quote: note the dismissive 'mere information, hardly worth the philosopher's attention' that is ascribed to the narrativist, his alleged apotheosis of metaphorical language thanks to its being 'upgraded to the real thing' and the narrativist's 'throwing out of epistemology'. And on top of that there are, of course, all the most regrettable things empiricists will immediately associate with (narrativist) 'aesthetics' and that we are implicitly invited to project on the 'postmodernist' position. The upshot of this rhetorics is to present the 'metaphorical' or 'narrativist' philosopher of history as an intellectual savage wildly throwing around with the philosophical furniture so carefully constructed and cared for by the empiricist.

But there is no need for this rhetoric. My own interest for narrativism (I shall not venture to speak for Hayden White) has nothing whatsoever to do with a belittling of historical research, i.e. with the process of gaining factual information about the past (to be expressed in true descriptions), with causal explanations at an elementary level etc. On the contrary, I am deeply impressed by the almost incredible achievements of archeologists, philologists or of historians of science and by how they have enlarged our knowledge of the past to an extent that previous generations of historians would have believed to be utterly unthinkable. However, the present popularity of narrativism has nothing to do with a haughty looking down upon historical research, but everything with the state of affairs in the historical theory of some thirty years ago. In those days historical theorists were mainly interested in topics such as the covering law model, the teleological explanaton of human action etc. Though the discussion of these topics has undoubtedly been most useful and is an indispensable and most

26. *Ibid.,* pp. 328, 329.

27. *Ibid.,* pp. 313, 314.

valuable part of historical theory, some theorists nonetheless felt that something important about historical writing was left out, namely the issue of how historical facts are integrated into the historical text. So these narrativist theorists tried to remedy this regrettable one-sidedness – and, consequently, their effort should be seen as a *supplement* rather than as a *replacement* of what was being done already.

This may explain what is wrong in Lorenz's view of narrativism as an 'inverted positivism'. He ascribes to narrativism an 'either-or logic' which he defines as follows:

> the either-or logic just referred to can be seen at work in the way narrative is analyzed in metaphorical narrativism: *either* the narrative of the historian is a simple by-product of research, as the "traditional", positivistic would have it, *or* it has nothing to do with with research at all. *Either* the narratives of historians are empirically founded – as the "traditional" positivistic view would have it – *or* historical narratives have no empirical foundations at all and are the product of literary imagination.[28]

Now, this picture of an 'either-or logic' exists only in Lorenz's mind: for what narrativists advocated was rather an 'and-and' logic. Narrativists recognized that in the first place the historians' narrative had its foundations in the results of historical research. They observed, next, that these results had to be integrated in some way or other into a historical text and they began to wonder how this is achieved and in what way historical reality may guide (and correct) the procedure. This is how they hit upon the linguistic turn with its notion of the 'semantic ascent' in terms of which the problem can be conceptualized of which chunk of reality had best correspond with what chunk of language. They were aware, moreover, that this was a problem different from, and not reducible to the kind of problem the historian encounters on the level of historical research. And this is why they saw in historical writing an 'and-and' (of historical research *and* of an integration of the results of historical research in the historical text), instead of Lorenz's 'either-or' (of both these things).

If one asks oneself how Lorenz could perceive an 'and-and' as an 'either-or', the answer is not hard to give. The key to the secret is his assertion that

> at both levels[29] the establishment of truth and falsity is dependent on fallible, intersubjective conventions; the difference between individual statements and complete narratives is therefore a difference in *degree* and not in *kind.*[30]

Surely, if one holds that there is no real difference between a and b (as Lorenz does with regard to 1) the level of individual statements and 2) that of complete narratives), it is a matter of elementary logic that 'and a - and b' can be exchanged by an 'either a - or b'. For the conjunction 'x and x' has the same truth value as the disjunction 'either

28. *Ibid.,* p. 314.

29 . The level of historical research and the level of narrativist integration

30. C. Lorenz, "Can Histories Be True? Narrativism, Positivism, and the 'Metaphorical Turn'" in *History and Theory* 37(3) October 1998, p. 325.

x or x'. So much for an explanation of Lorenz's misinterpretation of what is the narrativist's position. But that still leaves us with the issue of the plausibility of his own view that there should be a continuity between these two levels and that there is not a 'difference in *kind*' between historical research and narrative integration. Of course, I could resort now to what has been said above about the distinction between description (the level of the individual statement) and representation (the level of complete narratives) in order to question this continuity. However, I shall instead focus on a further inconsistency in Lorenz's own account. In the last phase of his argument Lorenz asks himself the question what criteria we should appeal to in order to assess the believability, truth, or plausibility of what the historian has written about the past. His answer is:

> with this goal epistemology has developed *truth-tracking* criteria – to use Carroll's apt phrase – such as scope, explanatory power, comprehensiveness and so on and these are the criteria that really matter whenever we want to assess rival knowledge claims.[31]

For a correct understanding of this quote it is important to observe that Lorenz recommends us not to confuse truth itself these 'truth-tracking' criteria such as scope etc. For in a note (referring to Goodman's *Ways of worldmaking*) Lorenz explicitly embraces the view that truth itself is of little help in science and in history ('truth, far from being a solemn and severe master, is a docile and obedient servant.'). Hence, not truth, but scope, explanatory power, comprehensiveness and so on are what we should consider if we wish to understand the rationality of historical debate.

I was no less disconcerted by this passage and this quote than by the passage that I referred to at the outset of the present discussion of Lorenz's historical empiricism. For in my book on narative logic I had similarly argued that scope and not truth is the right criterion for the plausibility of historical narrative[32] – but Lorenz makes no mention of this here, though he does elsewhere.[33] So just as in the case of the role of metaphor in historical writing there appears to be far more agreement between Lorenz and myself than Lorenz is willing to recognize – and if I am allowed to paraphrase Lorenz's own accusation of narrativism as being, in fact, an 'inverted positivism', I would feel tempted to characterize his own position as that of an 'inverted narrativism'.

Needless to say I am happy with Lorenz's embrace of the narrativist's scope criterion. But narrativism and the narrativist's scope criterion has its limits. For at the level of historical research truth and not scope is decisive. No sensible historian would appeal to 'scope, explanatory power or comprehensiveness' when he is compelled to make up his mind in a discussion on, for example, in what year Erasmus was born or on what the long term interest rates were in the US of 1887. Statements about issues like these

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31. *Ibid.,* p. 325.

32. F.R. ANKERSMIT, *Narrative logic. A semantic analysis of the historian's language* (Marthinus Nijhoff, Den Haag, 1983), pp. 220 - 248.

33. Elsewhere Lorenz presents his readers with an adequate exposition of how I had argued the scope criterion. See C. LORENZ, *Konstrukion der Vergangenheit. Eine Einführung in die Geschichtstheorie*, (Böhlau, Cologne, 1997), pp. 139 - 147.

are simply true or false – and scope etc. has no role to play in this (however difficult it may in practice sometimes be to establish truth or falsehood in such cases). So, paradoxically, Lorenz's empiricist position is in need of an extra injection of empiricism. The paradox came into being since empiricists – as Lorenz explicitly states in the passage I quoted a moment ago – have room for only *one* criterion of historical plausibility. So when confronted with the fact that historical writing comprises both description (truth) and representation (scope) they will have to make up their minds in what direction they will move, while downplaying the other. Lorenz decided to move as far into the direction of representation as his empiricism allowed him to do (and in my view even beyond that). He even went so far in this direction that narrativists (like me) will start worrying about what is left of the descriptive component in his argument and insist that he should allow more room for truth, and all that, than he presently is inclined to do.

As we shall see in a moment McCullagh opted for the other horn of the empiricist's dilemma: he reduces all representation to description and truth. But we should recognize above all that the dilemma is purely a production of empiricist ideology and that, in contrast to this ideology, 1) description ('speaking') and representation ('speaking about speaking') are *both* part of the historian's attempt to deal with the past and 2) that we should never be tempted into abandoning the one in favor of the other. The gist of McCullagh's empiricist criticism, as expressed in his recent *The truth of history,*[34] can be found in the following passage:[35]

> one philosopher of history, F.R. Ankersmit, has argued repeatedly that general descriptions of the past cannot be true, because they do not refer to anything real in the world. He thinks that particular events are real, but that generalizations are just conceptual constructions, created by historians but referring to nothing real at all.[36]

Now, I never said such a thing and it is no coincidence that McCullagh does not refer to any passages in my writings where such strange assertions can be found. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to see how this caricature of my position could come into being. For McCullagh goes on to write:

> Ankersmit first presented his reasons for denying that general terms refer to anything in the world in his book *Narrative Logic* (1983). In Chapter 5 of that book, he presents the following analysis of the use of such terms. Historians study available evidence and derive knowledge of many particular facts about the past; looking at these facts, they acquire an idea of one or more patterns in them, conceptual wholes which are sometimes referred to by general terms; they then describe these patterns in their writing. "For instance, terms like "Renaissance", "Enlightenment", "early

34. C. BEHAN MCCULLAGH, *The truth of history*, (Routledge, London, 1998).

35. I shall not comment on McCullagh's propensity to replace argument for invective and for a feigned or (probably) actual incapacity to understand my argument. Though I must confess that I found it a strange experience to discover such an aversion for rational and dispassionate argument in the writings of someone who elsewhere praises 'truth' and 'fairness' in such high-pitched wordings.

36. C. BEHAN MCCULLAGH, *The truth of history*, p. 64.

> modern European capitalism" or "the decline of the Church" are in fact names given to "images" or "pictures" of the past proposed by historians attempting to come to grips with the past"(p. 99).[37]

I pass over McCullagh's suggestion that, first, certain patterns (let alone 'an idea' of those patterns) are discerned in the past which are, next, 'described' with terms such as 'the Renaissance' etc.[38] For as I have always insisted, both in the book discussed by McCullagh and elsewhere, the word 'description' can only meaningfully be used with regard to the past *itself* and not with regard to the patterns that the historian decides, or, rather, proposes to project on it. And this distinction is absolutely crucial to my argument: for it reflects the distinction between description and representation discussed above. It surely is no coincidence that McCullagh fails to recognize the difference: for it does not fit into his empiricist framework that has room for '(true) description' only.

Most striking is, however, that McCullagh describes terms like 'the Renaissance' etc. as 'general terms'. Indeed, *if* terms like 'the Renaissance' or 'the Enlightenment' were 'general terms' such as 'being large', 'speaking robustly', 'trial, 'execution' etc. (these are McCullagh's own examples of general terms), *then* the views McCullagh attributes to me would be clearly nonsensical. For who would wish to deny that such general terms help us describe (past) reality (though I would resist the view that they 'refer' to reality).[39] But I have nowhere defended such a profoundly wrong-headed account of the status of such terms. Instead, I have always and consistently described them as the *proper names* of so-called 'narrative substances' (i.e. views or representations of the past or, as we have seen in the previous section, a common denominator to be discerned in a number of roughly comparable representations) referring to those narrative substances or representations of the past. So there are not just *two* levels, the one of the past itself and the one on which the past is described in terms of properties that are attributed to objects in the past named by, and referred to by the proper names mentioned in these decriptions. This is McCullagh's empiricist and descriptivist conception of historical language and of how it relates to the past. But we should, instead, adopt a *three* level model of how historical reality and the historian's language hang together. There is, first, the past itself, next the level of McCullagh's descriptions and, thirdly, that of (historical) representation. And since description and representations are logically different (see section 3), we should resist the descriptionist effort to reduce all representation to description.

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37. *Ibid*, p. 65.

38. Strictly speaking, this is philosophical mumbo-jumbo: historians do not describe 'patterns', but the past, though they may describe it *by* discerning patters in it. But what enables us to achieve something is not identical with what is achieved itself: an car may enable us to make a journey, but cars are not journeys.

39. In order to create new misunderstandings, when saying this, I have nothing more in mind that by common agreement in true statements (or descriptions) only the subjectterm, and not the predicate term, is said to refer. Unless one holds the counter-intuitive view that, apart from green or red objects, reality also contains such things as 'greenness' or 'redness'. This is, of course, what the medieval scholasticists called 'realism'.

Let me elaborate this. Exchanging the two level for the three level model implies that proper names can be found on both the second and the third level: a proper name can refer to an object in the past (second level) *and* to a representation of the past (third level). And (unfortunately) it can do so *both* by making use of *one and the same* proper name. We shall recognize the indispensibility of a third level if we note the equivalence of 1) 'Napoleon was a self-possessed person' (uttered by someone who just finished reading Caulaincourt's memoirs) and 2) 'Caulaincourt's Napoleon was a self-possessed person'. 'Napoleon' in statement 1) is interchangeable for 'Caulaincourt's Napoleon' in statement 2). In both 1) and 2) reference is made to a certain (i.e. Caulaincourt's) *representation* of Napoleon and *not* to the person of flesh and blood, who lived from 1769 to 1821 and was Emperor of the French. We tend to forget this meaning of statement 1) because of its misleading resemblance to a statement like 3) 'L'Empéreur n'était pas naturellement violent. Personne ne se maîtrisait comme lui quand il le voulait'[40] and where Caulaincourt undoubtedly refers to Napoleon himself and *not* to a representation of him (though it is *part* of such a representation). Because of the grammatical similarities of 1) and 3) we tend to conclude that both statements are logically equivalent as well. However, statements about the past (second level) must be distinguished from statements about representations of the past (third level).[41] I remind the reader here of my admonition in the previous section that in the writing of history the most dramatic logical disparities may hide themselves under grammatical similarity. The point is most strikingly illustrated by the foregoing considerations, for we observe here how even statements may move from the level of description (statement 3) to that of representation (the statements 2) and 3)). Statements may already be infected by the logic of representation.

So what has happened is this: in the book McCullagh refers to I discussed historical representation (as defined above). Since McCullagh's philosophical dictionary does not contain this notion but only variants of description, he felt compelled to search for the nearest equivalent in his own dictionary, which turned out to be the notion of the 'general term'. He probably felt that there must be 'something' general about notions like 'the Renaissance' or 'the Enlightenment' since they can be related to some more or less 'general' characteristics of the relevant historical periods. This is why he conveniently 'forgot' that I always and consistently characterized those terms as proper names (of representations) and not as general terms. He then went on to observe (correctly) that general terms can be used for formulating true descriptions of the past and concluded that my claim that such terms do no refer to historical reality must be wrong. But this is simply disregarding my position and not an argument against it.

Let us now widen our scope and consider McCullagh's discussion of the uniqueness of the Renaissance or of the Enlightenment. His argument is that we can not only

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40. A.A.L. DE CAULAINCOURT, *De Moscou à Paris avec l'Empéreur*, (Série Dix Dix-huit, Paris s.a.), p. 174.

41. For this all important issue - and where the necessity of the linguistic turn for historical writing announces itself - see F.R. Ankersmit, "Danto on representation, identity and indiscernibles", *History and Theory,* 37(4) December 1998, p. 59.

speak of 'the' Renaissance or 'the Enlightenment', but also of 'the Karolingian Renaissance' and even of 'Renaissances' in the plural as a general classificatory term. McCullagh's view is that from a logical point of view the term 'Renaissance' functions in much the same way as terms like 'dog' or chair':

> what Ankersmit seems never to have acknowledged is that different instances of general terms are always unique in detail, but that that does not prevent them from also being classified. He allows that there are really chairs and dogs. But chairs and dogs differ enormously. Indeed it is difficult to think of the general characteristics of all chairs. (...) Precisely the same is true of the general concepts used to characterize the past.[42]

As an example, McCullagh mentions in this context Haskins's *The Renaissance of the twelfth century* (1927)[43] and he argues that this book demonstrates that history knows different periods (think, moreover, of the 'Karolingian Renaissance') that can all be 'classified' as Renaissances – just as different dogs can all be classified as dogs in spite of their sometimes impressive differences. And he then concludes hat 'there is no doubt that some classificatory terms are quite vague, and their vagueness can sometimes lead historians to dispute their applicability'.[44]

Now, Huizinga had already criticized Haskins's use of the term Renaissance to charactize the mind of the twelfth century with the following argument:

> the mind of the twelfth century, says Etienne Gilson, may seem to us to have been closer to that of the Renaissance then the mind of the thirteenth. The twelfth century is a century of preparation, preparation for the thirteenth, that is. If this may seem contradictory to us, the mistake is our's, who are in the habit of considering the renaissance as the culmination of the development of all of the Middle Ages. But in order to grasp the twelfth century, it should not be compared to the Renaissance but to the thirteenth.[45]

In sum, Huizinga criticizes Haskins's use of the term renaissance for the twelfth century for having been inspired by a teleological conception of the past and that will make us forget about the uniqueness of different historical epochs. Haskins knew about the Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century and then decided to see renaissances wherever something happened that seemed to prepare the way for this Renaissance. It is as if you were saying that your years at secondary school were, in fact, already a universitary study since they prepared you for the latter – thus denying to your years at secondary school a status of their own. So Huizinga insists that one should resist the temptation (or, at least be very careful about what one is doing) to discover everywhere Renaissances and Enlightenments after historians have characterized certain periods as 'the Renaissance' or 'the Enlightenment'. For this

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42 . i.e. concepts such as 'Renaissance' 'Enlightenment' etc. (F.A.)

43. McCullagh mistakenly gives 1957 as its date of publication.

44. C. BEHAN MCCULLAGH, *The truth of history*, p. 68.

45. J. HUIZINGA, Abaelard, in id., *Verzamelde Werken 4. Cultuurgeschiedenis*, (Tjeenk Willink, Haarlem, 1949), p. 120 (my translation).

may create obfuscation rather than clarification. And obfuscation is to be expected in most cases since the exact meaning of such terms has always to be stipulated by everyone using them and is never part of the normal use of language.

Much to my surprise McCullagh presents himself a striking example of this systematic instability of the meaning of historical terms or concepts – an example that seems to me absolutely devastating for his own thesis. For he discusses a book by George Holmes on the Florentine Renaissance and which is entitled *The Florentine Enlightenment*. So here the Renaissance is 'referred' to with the 'classificatory term' 'Enlightenment'! I would now like to ask Professor McCullagh what he would say when he was living in a world of language users where one and the same thing can be characterized by some as a dog and by others as a chair. Would not this strike him as a little odd or, at least, unusual and in need of clarification? So does not his own example make perfectly clear that classificatory concepts such as 'dog' and 'chair' obey a different logic than typically historical concepts such as 'the Renaissance' or 'the Enlightenment' and that the latter therefore require a separate handling by the logician?

I think that McCullagh's theory of historical concepts – classificatory or not – is vitiated by a lack of understanding of how language and reality are related in historical writing. He seems to have two theories on it. He refers here, first, to Wittgenstein's well-known language game theory implying that no sufficient and necessary conditions can be given for the correct use of words. And he then goes on to defend the theory that 'there are criteria for the application of most general terms'[46] – hence precisely the theory that Wittgenstein wished to discredit with his language game theory. Now, I shall not bother McCullagh with this inconsistency, but ask him instead what authority we have for the correct application of words to reality. The later Wittgenstein's answer was, essentially, that 'the meaning is the use' and the whole scandal of his theory was that there are no criteria for justifying the use. There is just the use, and that is all there is to it. But what about the *use* of terms like 'the Renaissance or 'the Enlightenment'? Is there such a generally accepted use – as in the case of terms like 'dog' or 'chair'? Apparently not, if some historians will characterize a certain period as 'the (Florentine) Renaissance' and others, such as Holmes, as 'the (Florentine) Enlightenment'. And there will, perhaps, even be historians with a penchant for compromise arguing that it was both (for was the Renaissance not also a period of enlightenment?) – thus making us imagine a people made up of three categories of language users where the first category calls a certain type of thing a dog, a second category calls it a chair and then you have still a third category saying that it is *both* a dog and a chair. It is to be expected that verbal communication will be quite a challenge for this people and that they will have to spend a disproportional amount of their time and energy on the meaning of words. As, indeed, not coincidentally is the case in historical writing.

Now, of course we do have such an authority: this is historical debate as it gradually evolves in the history of historical writing. But in the course of this debate disagreement is never decided by an appeal to the meaning of words. One does not say to

46. C. BEHAN MCCULLAGH, *The truth of history*, pp. 67, 68.

Haskins, 'Well, we all know what the word renaissance means and now you have (in)correctly applied it to (part of) the past', nor would we argue that Holmes is sadly ignorant of the meaning of both the words 'Renaissance' and 'Enlightenment' because of his use of the terms in question. Instead historians will quietly wait and see what a historian *does* with these words in his book or article. That is, when introducing or using these terms in an unexpected and novel way, historians will ask themselves whether this new use may make us aware of something of the past that we had not noticed before or whether it may make us see connections that are new to us. Questions like these are decisive – and not whether a term has been correctly applied (or not). Historical debate is not a semantic quarrel about the exact meaning of words, but about the past.

And it is precisely in terms of *different* meanings given to terms like 'the Renaissance' or 'the Enlightenment' that historians settle this kind of disputes. Or, to put it provocatively, it is not the *overlap*, but *difference* in meaning that does all of the work in the practice of historical debate. That is why these concepts are, and even ought to be, 'essentially contested', as Gallie put it half a century ago already.[47] And whoever (like McCullagh) relies on what is common in different uses of historical concepts, relies on what is pure dead weight and irrelevant in historical practice. So, if there would actually exist theories of history capable of 'murdering history' (to use Windschuttle's alarmist phraseology) – which is most unlikely, though – the dangers will come from doctrinaire empiricists like McCullagh (and Windschuttle himself) rather than from their liberal-minded narrativist opponents.

I come to a final remark. McCullagh fights his battle under the banner of historical truth. 'Truth' is for him the highest and most sublime aim of all of historical writing. And he is in the habit of throwing historical truth as a kind of argumentative handgrenade in the direction of anybody whom he (rightly or wrongly) suspects of cherishing relativist or similarly unhealthy sympathies. Now, truth surely is supremely important and everything begins with truth, though (and there I would disagree with McCullagh) it does not end with it. This is already the case in the sciences. One may fill libraries with true observations on physical reality, but without ever adding an iota to our understanding of it. Decisive in the development of the sciences over the last two hundred years has not been truth, but the talent for identifying those truths that really count and that may deepen our understanding of the nature of physical reality. This is what distinguishes important new theories from those that are not, and great scientists from their merely mediocre colleagues. And so it is in history. It may well be that the historian who advances a poor view of the Renaissance never sins against the commandment to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. It may even be that all the truths unveiled by him had never been noticed before – and yet his colleagues may

47. Further, I shall try to show that there are disputes, centered on the concepts which I have just mentioned, which are perfectly genuine: which, although not resolvable by argument of any kind, *are nevertheless sustained by perfectly respectable arguments and evidence*. This is what I mean by saying that there are concepts which are essentially contested, concepst the use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users (my italics)'. See W.B. GALLIE, "Essentially contested concepts", in id., *Philosophy and the historical understanding*, (Schocken Books, New York, 1968), p. 158.

cast aside his work as not significantly adding to our understanding of the past. In our itinerary through the past truth should always be our companion, but never our guide (for the simple reason that it *could* never be our guide – neither is it in the sciences.[48]

One of the advantages of the linguistic turn is that it may enable us to understand this. We have seen that, in agreement with the linguistic turn, we will not always be able to distinguish between the 'compulsion of language' and the 'compulsion of experience'. The implication is that we may often hold true beliefs – I emphasize: *true beliefs* – about the past that have their origin in the language used or proposed by the historian rather than in established empirical fact. Once again, truth is not at stake here: the historian who uses an impoverished, conventional and unimaginative language need never be found guilty of violating truth because of this. His truths are simply uninteresting trivial truths and that we would rather not waste our time on. In sum, the linguistic turn teaches us that we may discern in language, and more specifically in the concepts, the vocabulary and the metaphors that we use, our guide to avoid the uninteresting truths and to get on the track of those truths that will deepen our understanding. And, as Gallie emphasized already,[49] recognizing the limitations of truth does not in the least imply that we are now the will-less playthings of prejudice, arbitrariness and irrationality. It can be shown that the double requirement of scope-maximalization and of originality (by the way, a requirement amazingly that is surprisingly similar to what theorists such as Karl Popper have developed for the sciences) can both explain and justify what is decisive in historical debate. The rationality of historical debate can be explained in terms of these two requirements, and truth has no role to play in this.[50]

5. Literary theory and historical theory

I started this essay with the well-known fact that Hayden White's *Metahistory* of 1973 completely changed existing historical theory. Old questions lost much of their previous urgency and new questions now demanded the attention. I tried to explain the nature of the change in terms of the linguistic turn. I did so because the linguistic turn

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48. Since statements like these tend continuously to be misinterpreted by my readers, I hasten to add that this does *not in the least* imply a rejection of the rationality of historical writing and of historical discussion. On the contrary, I think that I am an even stauncher believer in the rationality of the discipline of history than my empiricist detractors since they are, in the end, often compelled to some an almost ritual concession to relativism in order to explain away where the facts about historical writing are at odds with their proud empiricist claims (I remind the reader here of my comments on Evans's book, or of Lorenz's view that to a certain extent the historian is, either willingly or unwillingly, always at the mercy of ethical and political values). My position *nowhere* obliges me to such defaitist concessions. My thesis is, merely, that we should not appeal to truth in order to explain and justify historical rationality.

49 . *See* above, W.B. GALLIE, "Essentially contested concepts", in id., *Philosophy and the historical understanding*, p. 158.

50. See the last chapter in my *Narrative logic*; and for a further refinement of the position defended there my 'De rationaliteit van de geschiedbeoefening' in F.R. ANKERSMIT, *De spiegel van het verleden. Exploraties 1, Geschiedtheorie*, (Kapellen : Kok Agora, Pelckmans, Kampen 1996), pp. 59 - 96. And, to avoid misunderstanding, truth is, of course, a non-negotiable requirement and a *conditio sine qua non* at the level of description.

is the best key for getting access to the nature of these changes in recent historical theory. But I should add that, when doing so, my account is not in agreement with the facts of how these changes actually came about. In *Metahistory* the linguistic turn is never referred to – and if I'm not mistaken neither has White paid attention to it in his later writings. The explanation is that White found his main source of inspiration not in the philosophy of language, but in literary theory. Both in *Metahistory* and in his later works Northrop Frye, Auerbach, Barthes, Jakobson etc. are the theorists White most frequently refers to, whereas he is less interested in philosophers, whether they had accepted the linguistic turn or not. Even an author such as Richard Rorty, whose views are so close to his own, seems never to have provoked his interest. And this is true not only of White, but of most of later historical theorists, such as Kellner, La-Capra, Gosman, Rigney, Shiner, Carrard or Linda Orr, whether they followed White or arrived independently at conclusions similar to White's.

So this raises the question of the relationship between the linguistic turn and literary theory. And, more specifically, the question whether both come down to much the same – as most historical theorists seem to believe – or whether there are some differences between the two that we should take into account.

Now, obviously, there are important similarities. Both the linguistic turn and literary theory emphasize that language is not a mere 'mirror of nature' and that all our knowledge and all our linguistic representations of reality bear the traces of the linguistic medium in which they are formulated. One might call this the 'linguistic Kantianism'[51] that is shared by both the linguistic turn and of literary theory – language functions in both cases much like the Kantian categories of the understanding. But there are no less important differences between the two. Of course it is difficult to generalize over such a complex discipline as literary theory, but whether one thinks of formalism, of structuralism, of deconstructivism, of reader response theories, of psychoanalytic theory or of Marxist criticism,[52] the literary text always is the object of research, hence investigated *reality*. This is, in fact, less trivial and innocuous then it may at first seem to be. For the implication is that literary theory does not really problematize the language/reality gap, as this is done in epistemology and in the philosophy of language in general. It follows that for a literary theorist there is absolutely nothing revolutionary, or even interesting in the statement that a text is a 'thing' or an 'object', which is part of (empirical) reality. For him or her the assertion is no more sensational than when we would tell the biologist that flowers and bacteria are part of reality. So he freely talks about language as if it were no less part of reality than flowers and bacteria; and he will see no more theoretical and philosophical problems in doing so than when the biologist discusses his bacteria and his flowers

51. For an exposition of White's linguistic Kantianism, see the introduction of my *History and tropology: The rise and fall of metaphor* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994).

52. These are the categories in which Richter subdivided contemporary literary theory in his textbook *The critical tradition*, (Boston, 1998). Strangely enough narrativist theorists of history have never paid much attention to narratology. An exception is K. PIHLAINEN, *Resisting history. The ethics of narrative representation*, (Turku University Press, Turku, 1999).

(though, of course, he will discover all kind of fascinating problems in the *linguistic* or *textual reality* investigated by him).

But this is quite different for the philosopher. For *him* the reality/language gap is the gap where all the secrets of reference, meaning and truth originate. For him there is, on the one hand, reality, and, on the other, language and when crossing the gap between the two he covers the trajectory where all the topics of his research can be situated. So he will immediately cast aside the suggestion that language is an object or a thing – for then there would be no difference between the beginning and the end of the trajectory investigated by him. It is true that some philosophers[53] say that language is a thing, but when they do so they are well aware that they are proposing a most revolutionary and provocative thesis. They may argue, for example, that whereas statements belong to the domain of language, texts can properly be said to belong to reality again. And they will then argue their point by stating that all those difficult problems of reference, truth and meaning (accompanying the reality/language gap) will reappear when we move from the level of the statement to that of the complex (historical) text.[54] Hence, the assertion that language is a thing is for the philosopher a far more problematic statement – and one that is badly in need of far more clarification and qualification – than for the literary theorist.

Of course, the problems that provoke the philosopher's professional interest all reappear when we were to ask for the relationship between the text (as the literary theorist's object of research) and the language used by him to express the results of his research. But *this* trajectory is *not* investigated by the literary theorist. He investigates texts and not the epistemological problem of how *his* language is related to the (textual) reality studied by him.

Hence, for all their agreement about language not being a transparent medium in its relationship to reality, the philosopher defending the linguistic turn has something different in mind with this than the literary theorist. For the literary theorist the recognition of this fact amounts to the identification of a new, and hitherto not noticed part of empirical reality – i.e. the (literary) text – and that can, next, be investigated empirically just like any other aspect of reality. For the philosopher, however, the non-transparency of language has its implications for how language (co-)determines the *true beliefs* that we have about reality (more specifically, the fact that we can not always discern between 'the compulsion of language' and the 'compulsion of experience'. For the literary theorist this insight has no relevance – it could acquire any relevance only when he would start thinking philosophically about how the language that *he* uses is related to the language and the texts investigated by him. But why should he be interested in this? Similarly, why should the physicist be interested in epistemological problems? The problem is irrelevant for the kind of research he is

53. *See* for example, A.C. DANTO, *The transfiguration of the commonplace*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Ma) 1981), Chapter 7.

54. As I have attempted to demonstrate in my 'The use of language in the writing of history', in *History and tropology: The rise and fall of metaphor.*

doing. So it follows that, in fact, one can be a literary theorist without ever needing to embrace the linguistic turn – and *vice versa*.

It follows from the foregoing considerations that there certainly is common ground in what the linguistic turn and literary theory must imply for the historical theorist. And from that perspective it is understandable that historical theorists didn't worry too much about potential differences in these implications. But, as we now must recognize, such differences should be expected to exist and conceptual clarity requires us to carefully scrutinize these differences. For this may enable us to say something about what is good and bad in contemporary historical theory, as far as it draws its inspiration from literary theory.

The crucial difference is that the linguistic turn puts on the agenda the transition from reality to language. This is not the case with literary theory since 1) it exclusively deals with language or texts and 2) since literary theory does not formulate a specific view about the epistemological relationship between its own theories and its object of investigation. One tends to forget about the latter issue because literary theory always discusses how we should read and interpret texts – and this seems to involve the epistemological relationship between reader and text. However, we must distinguish between what goes on in the relationship between the reader of a literary text and the literary text on the one hand and what happens between the theoretical text of the literary theorist and those aspects of literature discussed in the theoretical text on the other. Only at the latter level the epistemological problems will be discussed that we may encounter when investigating the epistemological or interpretative problems encountered on the first level.

To put it in one word, indeed, literary theory is a theory about texts, but not about its *own* texts. Take, for example, deconstructivism: it is a recommendation to the reader to deconstruct literary text read by him, but not a recommendation to deconstruct deconstructivism. And even if one would try to apply deconstructivsim to its own text – as undoubtedly some authors, such as Derrida and Rorty, who see in the (con-)fusion of levels their main contribution to theory - we would be faced with an endless regress. For then consistency would require us to do the same with the results of the deconstruction of the deconstructivist text, and so on *ad infinitum*. And it follows, that one should suspect all attempts (such as Rorty's)[55] to effect a fusion of philosophy and literary theory. For such attempts will inevitably founder in an endless regress – as we may expect when we try to solve philosophical problems with non-philosophical means.

It will, by now, be clear what the historical theorist can and what he cannot expect of literary theory. It may help us to read and to properly understand the historical text; it will make us aware of the fact that the historical text is a highly complex 'machine' for the generation of textual meaning, and that we have hitherto been blind to many of these complexities. It may inform us about the hidden meanings of a text, meanings that have not been intended by the author and in many cases not perceived by their

55. Exemplary is R. RORTY, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge,1989).

readers. To be sure, the significance of these hidden meanings cannot reasonably be doubted. Think, for example, of the affinities of the nineteenth century realist or naturalist novel on the one hand, and the realist style of much of historical writing down to the present day that have been pointed out by authors such as Roland Barthes, Hayden White, Hans Kellner, Lionel Gossman or Ann Rigney on the other.[56] Here the discovery of hidden meaning amounted to the identification of nothing less than a historical *style*. And in literary theory the identification of style is one of the most important keys to the secrets of the text. It is no different in (the history of) historical writing. For an analysis of the history of such historical styles may show us the most general features of how different periods conceived of their past. Think of how White distinguished between the ironical style of Enlightenment historical writing, the metaphorical and organicist style of Romantic historical writing and the metonymical style of its socio-scientifically inspired contemporary counterparts. And it may even be, as White's tropological model suggests, that there exists a hidden stylistic logic that leads from one style to a later one. Hence, no one who intends to write the history of historical writing can ignore the lessons taught be literary theory. And indeed, since White's *Metahistory* historiography, i.e. the history of historical writing, has undergone a complete metamorphosis. The books written by the authors I mentioned in note 56) resemble in virtually no respect the books by a Fueter, a Meinecke, a Srbik or an Iggers – though I would certainly not wish to imply that their work has completely been superseded by 'the new historiography'.

But literary theory is far less helpful when we have to deal with the central problem of historical theory, i.e. the problem of how the historian, accounts for, or represents past reality. It is a theory about where we should look for the meaning of texts, but not about how a text may represent a reality other than itself and about the relationship between the text and reality. Certainly the problem of the meaning of a text is part of the problem of that relationship. How could we say anything sensible about that relationship, if we did not know what we are reading when reading a text? So we may surmise that in order to answer the question of the relevance of literary theory for historical theory it will in the first place be necessary to answer the question how problems of meaning and problems of historical representation interfere with each other in the practice of historical writing.

In order to deal with this preliminary question, let us take as an example the historical debate on the Renaissance. Needless to say, if historians of the Renaissance are to have a fruitful debate, a minimal condition is that here should be sufficient agreement about the meaning of the different works that have been written on that topic. Equally obviously, literary theory has the pretension to be able to deal with this problem. But less obvious is how this will work out in practice. Suppose a deconstructivist literary theorist intervenes in the debate on the Renaissance and argues that the meaning of

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56. R. BARTHES, *Michelet par lui même*, (Editions du Seuil, Paris,1954); H. WHITE, *Tropics of discourse*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1978); H. KELLNER, *Language and historical representation*, (Wisconsin University Press, Madison, 1989); L. GOSMAN, *Between literature and history*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1990; A. RIGNEY, *The rhetoric of historical representation. Three narrative histories of the French Revolution*, (Cambridge 1990).

X's book on the Renaissance differs from what one, or more of the participants in the debate have always believed its meaning to be. For example, the deconstructivist might take his point of departure in Burckhardt's famous picture of how during the Renaissance the veil was blown away under which during the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness still lay hidden. And then he might plausibly argue that this was for the human individual not in the least the liberating gain that Burckhardt wished to see in it, but, in fact, a tremendous loss and a tremendous impoverishment of the self. A loss comparable to the traumatic loss that each human individual undergoes when moving from a solipsistic identification with the world (i.e. the mother) to being a puny and miserable individual apart from, and opposite to all of the outside world. When regarded from the perspective of the world outside, one loses the the whole world by becoming oneself – and when regarded from the subjects's perspective the Renaissance discovery of the self was the first step in the direction of the nakedness of the later Cartesian and Kantian transcendental self. It was only the organicism of Romanticism that would restore to the human individual a small part of the treasures lost by the Renaissance. Small wonder that Romanticism so much liked to idealize the Middle Ages.[57] Proceeding further from there, the deconstructivist might go on and see in the apparent triumphs of the Renaissance a poor compensation desperately craved for by a culture having lost all its trusted and traditional supports. Was the free and emancipated individual of the Renaissance not also a pitiable solitary in hostile world that continuously had to muster all its availabe energies in order to keep at bay the unnamable and unspeakable dangers threatening it? Was this not precisely the message of Machiavelli's claim of the endless fight between the Goddess Fortuna and *virtù*? And the deconstructivist would conclude by saying that we have always noticed only half of Burckhardt's text, but there is a darker undertone in his text as well and that fully comprehending Burckhardt's amazing genius will require us to recognize the persence of *both* meanings in his text, instead of only its surface meaning.

Well, this is merely an example of the unnerving things that literary theorists could do with historical texts.[58] And there can be no doubt about that insights like these in the hidden meanings of the historical text might immensely complicate historical debate. It might be inferred that we need first consult the literary theorist before entering on any serious historical debate. The obviously uninviting implications of this complication of historical debate will undoubtedly have contributed to the historian's disgust of literary theory and their conviction that its introduction into the practice of history might well amount to 'the murdering of history (Windschuttle)'. And this might also explain why historians tend to be so doggedly dogmatic about authorial intention: it seems to be the only reliable brake upon a dissolution of historical debate into the mists of radical textual ambiguity. Hence, whereas the abandonment of authorial intention provides the literary theorist with his daily bread in the academic world, it seems to deprive the historian of his.

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57. Do the ambiguities in his position thus not reflect Burckhardt's own highly ambiguous relationhip to Romanticissim?

58. Unparalleled are Gossman's analyses of Thierry and Michelet in his *Literature*.

But are things really so serious as the historian fears? Not incidentally did I take deconstructivism as my example of what literary theory might do to history and to historical theory. For even deconstructivism with its alleged fascination for subversion, irrationality and inconsistency – and therefore hated and feared so much by the Windschuttles and the Evanses – is no real threat. As my example may have made clear, there are two sides to the deconstructivist's intervention. In the first place, he discovers hitherto unsuspected meanings in the historian's text and by doing so may make us better aware than we were of what is of interest in the text. What could be wrong with this? Second, by doing so he suggests new ways of looking at the past – without, however, pronouncing about the plausibility of these new views of the past from the perspective of the professional historian. This is left to him – and so the net result seems to be an gain rather than a loss.

Nevertheless, the historian's fears are not wholly groundless. For whereas in the example mentioned just now the distinction is carefully respected between linguistic meaning and historical meaning, between what we owe to language and what we owe to the world – so that language does not become experience's rival *in the latter's own domain*[59] – this may, at times, be different. White's tropology provides us with a good example. For on the one hand it is a purely formal system derived from relevant suggestions that White had found in the writings by Vico, Frye, Pepper and Mannheim. As such it may at first sight seem to be devoid of material implications. But if we take a closer look, this initial impression appears to be mistaken. Thus the historian's account will, according to the tropological grid, always and inevitably be either a comedy, a tragedy, a romance or a satire. Surely, these are all narrative forms, but, nevertheless forms with a more or less specific content, as White liked to emphasize himself by speaking about 'the content of the form'(not coincidentally the title of one of his books). Undoubtedly, this is where most resistance against White's system felt by historians orginates. Historians now felt like painters who are told that, wittingly or unwittingly, they are all either impressionists, expressionists, fauvists or cubists – and that every effort on their part to escape these four representational forms is doomed to failure. Understandably historians now tended to see tropology as a system providing them with four speculative philosophies of history dictating a large part of what they wished to say about the past. The fact that they were allowed to choose between four different speculative philosophies they saw as an only meagre improvement on the exclusivist pretensions of traditional speculative philosophy of history. In sum, in contrast to deconstructivist openness, White thus placed the historian in a closed world of fixed forms. If White's system had been more flexible to adapt itself to each historical content, it would undoubtedly have provoked the historian's ire far less than presently is the case. And the problem was further aggravated since White did not offer a kind of 'transcendental deduction' for his list tropological forms.

The linguistic turn, as expounded above, will show us our way out of this predicament. For when we cannot discern between the compulsion of language and

59. I italicize this phrase in order to demarcate the linguistic imperialism discussed here from the relationship between the claims of language and of experience as expounded by the linguistic turn.

that of experience, we could not possibly ever be justified in saying that formal constraints strain historical evidence. Hence the lesson we may learn from the difficulties occasioned by White's tropology is that formalism should at all times avoid to foist forms with a more or less fixed content on the potential richness of historical writing. When this happens the claims of the linguistic turn have been illegitimately transgressed. Language is now no longer merely a potential source of truth irreducible to what reality shows to be the case, but language now starts to interfere with the compulsion of experience. It now begins to dictate what experience may and may not discover in reality by being hospitable to certain contents offered by experience while being hostile to certain others – just as cubist formalism is hospitable to the straight line and the square angle and hostile to the circle or the ellipse.

It might now be objected that the requirement is an impossible one, at odds with the very nature of all formalism. For formalism always imposes certain forms on reality (or on how we perceive it); so a formalism completely respecting the historian's freedom of representation seems to be a *contradictio in terminis*. It is as if one began by leaving to each historian a complete freedom to do as he pleases, and then to solemnly confer on each narrative the honour of exemplifying a certain form that fits this narrative only and no other. Surely, this is the *Liebestod* of formalism.

But in the writing of history there is nothing odd, or objectionable about this anarchistic kind of formalism. In order to clarify this, I would like to refer to my example of how to apply the linguistic turn to historical writing. We observed there how a linguistic form, i.e. the meaning of a concept such as 'the Renaissance', was devised by the historian in order to give form and meaning to a specific part of the past. Here we find a perfect fit between form and content and its perfection is *apriori* demonstrable. For the form is exclusively defined by its content, and each different content would automatically give rise to a different form. But why still use the term 'form' in order to describe *this* specific content; what does it add to the possession of mere content? Why would we need the notion? Is it anything more than Wittgenstein's 'wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it', and that is, therefore not part of the machine? The answer is that the form gives coherence to what was hitherto *mere content*; only thanks to *it* a chaotic mass of data about the past is organized into a recognizable *whole*. Only if endowed with a form as intended here can historical content be processed in the practice of historical research and of historical debate. The formal 'skin of the form' is, and ought to be infinitely thin since it should add nothing to what is within it,[60] but even so it is sufficiently strong for performing the job it is expected to do. So we should be grateful to White for having made us aware of this formal 'skin', but his tropological skin is still too 'thick' and too 'leathery', so to say, to adapt itself with complete ease to each individual content.

In order to properly grasp the nature of its job, I recall to mind the view that there is no represented without its representation. If we apply this insight to the present context we shall recognize that this symmetry of a representation and what it represents had

60. This is where this 'skin' differs form the 'thicker skin' in the formalism of White's tropology and where the 'skin' does have a material content of its own.

best be (re-)formulated in terms of *form*. Or, to be more precise, forms denote those aspects of (a) *represented* (reality), that correspond to the nature of a certain representation as denoted by a certain historical concept. To put it in one formula: concepts are the linguistic counterparts of forms in reality. But these forms do not logically and temporally antedate representation. When accounting for reality in terms of (aesthetic) representation, representation projects its own forms on reality – thus endowing it with the property of being a represented reality. And the paradox is that, on the one hand representation does not (or, rather, should not) add anything to reality, nor even to our knowledge of it, while, on the other hand, it adds all that we need for our being able to find our way around in the world. It is, therefore, in the interaction between concept and form that language and reality come closest to each other – and this why representation brings us closer to the world than description. We tend to forget this because representations are often compositions of descriptions – which seems to confer a logical priority upon the latter. But we need only think of painting in order to realize ourselves that representation without description is possible. And it is, in this context, no less instructive to observe that representation is intimately related to (the forms enabling us to) 'find our way around in the world'. Representation is practical, description is theoretical and abstract. Animals and babies, not (yet) having the use of language, do have the capacity to recognize forms in reality and, thus, of representing it, while not yet being able to describe it. Or, put differently, when we ascend with historical writing from the level of description to that of representation, we move, in fact, backwards to a most elementary level in our encounter with the world.

6. Conclusion: the dangers of literary theory for historical theory

By taking my point of departure in the linguistic turn, I have tried to draw up an inventory of what we may expect from literary theory for a better understanding of historical writing. The linguistic turn is an extremely useful instrument for doing this since, just like literary theory, it problematizes tradionalist conceptions of the relationship between language and reality. The linguistic turn does so by making us aware of the fact that the use of language is not restricted to our speaking about reality but that it sometimes also surreptitiously and unnoticedly resorts to a speaking about this speaking about reality. Language then becomes a kind of 'instant epistemology' i.e. an epistemological claim for how in a *specific* case language and reality had best be related. Grammar does not warn us when this shift takes place – and this (partly) explains is why empiricists tended to ignore this dimension of our use(s) of language.

If we are ready to recognize in historical writing this dimension of 'instant epistemology', the question of what we may expect from literary theory is not hard to answer. For whatever compartment of literary theory we have in mind, it does not address the problem of the epistemological gap between language and the world. It is an investigation of literary language and though it does so by transforming language into a part of the world, this should not tempt us to think that it can teach us anything of value about how language relates to the world. For in so far as this problem (might) reappear in literary theory, it would only do so in the guise of the problem of how its own results relate to its object of investigation (i.e. the literary text). And this

(epistemological) problem is *not* investigated in literary theory – neither is it in any way relevant to its purposes.

It follows that literary theory can be most helpful as an instrument for analyzing historical texts – and as such it presently is correctly perceived to be the historiographer's main auxiliary science. Whoever wants to write the history of historical writing can no longer afford to ignore literary theory. But literary theory is useless as a theory of history: it has not, and could not possibly have to say anything of interest about the issue of how the historian succeeds in representing the past. It is true that *some* historical theorists have derived, either implicitly or explicitly, from literary theory claims about the relationship between the past and its textual representations. But, as we have seen when discussing White, this will result in speculative philosophies of history. The explanation is that this use of literary theory will drag along in its wake a material content to the forms that the historian discerns in past reality – thus adding to our view of the past elements whose introduction can only be justified on the basis of the claims propounded in the preferred literary theory, but not on the basis what the past has been like.

In sum, let us restrict the uses of literary theory to the writing of the history of historical writing – where it is immensely valuable – and not admit it to the quite different field of historical theory.

Opsomming

Die linguistiese wending, literêre en historiese teorie

Die opstel handel oor die verhouding tussen literêre teorie aan die een kant en historiese teorie (of filosofie) aan die ander kant. Sedert die publikasie van White se gesaghebbende studie, *Metahistory,* in 1973 het geskiedsteoretici 'n riglyn gekry waarvolgens hulle hulself ten opsigte van die literêre teorie kan oriënteer. Hierdie konsepsie van die aard van geskiedenis en die take van historiese teorie het 'n totaal nuwe inhoud aan die historiografie gegee. Dit was voordelig en daar moet sorg gedra word dat hierdie bate in die toekoms nie verlore gaan nie.

Die aksent op literêre teorie het, egter nie ons insigte verdiep in soverre dit die historiese teks en die verlede self betref nie. 'n Noukeurige analise van wat die sogenaamde linguistiese wending vir geskiedsteorie behoort te beteken, kan verduidelik waarom dit so maklik sowel as gevaarlik kan wees om die belangrikheid van literêre teorie vir die geskiedsteorie te oorbeklemtoon. Die implikasie is dat ons weer eens die ou semantiese en epistemologiese vrae met betrekking tot die aard van geskiedskrywing moet nagaan, wat so lank verwaarloos was.