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MAKING HISTORY, TALKING ABOUT HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

Making history—in the sense of writing it—is often set against talking about it, with most historians considering writing history to be better than talking about it. My aim in this article is to analyze the topic of making history versus talking about history in order to understand most historians' evident decision to ignore talking about history. Ultimately my goal is to determine whether it is possible to talk about history with any sense.

To this end, I will establish a typology of the different forms of talking practiced by historians, using a chronological approach, from the Greek and Roman emphasis on the visual witness to present-day narrativism and textual analysis. Having recognized the peculiar textual character of the historiographical work, I will then discuss whether one can speak of a method for analyzing historiographical works. After considering two possible approaches—the philosophy of science and literary criticism—I offer my own proposal. This involves breaking the dichotomy between making and talking about history, adopting a fuzzy method that overcomes the isolation of self-named scientific communities, and that destroys the barriers among disciplines that work with the same texts but often from mutually excluding perspectives. Talking about history is only possible if one knows about history and about its sources and methods, but also about the foundations of the other social sciences and about the continuing importance of traditional philosophical problems of Western thought in the fields of history and the human sciences.

In everyday life, we often set *making* things against *talking about* things, supposing that it is always better to make them than to talk about them, or, in other words, that acting is better than talking. This idea, commonplace in our colloquial language but one that has also extended to literature and philosophy, can also be observed in the domain of history, in which we must distinguish the double meaning of the word "history." Making history can mean to "star" (individually or collectively) in historical events—but this is not the meaning in which I am now interested. However, making history is also a synonym for writing and publishing works of historiography; given this meaning, talking about history would therefore be to converse about such written works without making them (either because of a lack of intention or capacity).

Consider the lack of interest in metahistorical reflections displayed by most historians: among them it is considered better to write historiographical works than to analyze them. "True" historians are those who produce great historiographical works, leaving reflection on history to marginal areas, such as books on "thoughts about history" that some historians write as they reach maturity. In

the Spanish case, until recently the only contact that historians have had with historiographical reflection has been through their reports in competitions for a university chair, where they are supposed to develop the "concept, method, and sources" of their subject.

My aim is to analyze the topic of making history versus talking about history in order to understand most historians' evident decision to ignore talking about history. Ultimately my goal is to determine whether it is possible to talk about history with any sense.

I

Note first that every historian (not only those who write historiographical works but also those who write about them) is in fact talking or writing. My first task is to establish a typology of the different forms of talking practiced by historians. To this end it will be convenient to pose some questions:

Who is speaking in the historical text?

To whom is the historical text addressed?

In what capacity is the speaker speaking?

What is the speaker speaking about?

We must first answer these questions and then we will be able to understand if it still makes any sense to set making history against talking about history, and if it is possible to practice this second activity with a method. I wish to start with the earliest forms of historiography in order to establish a genealogy of current ways of speaking. So, let's go back to the origin of the Western tradition in which our most ancient linguistic and literary archetypes are established, that is to say, the Greek world.

When we consider Greek historiography, our attention is first attracted by the fact that the historian is not an absent narrative voice (the *sine qua non* condition for "historical discourse" according to Roland Barthes's famous analysis). On the contrary, the historian says clearly who he is (it is always a man, of course), and then who is speaking in his work. So Herodotus begins his books: "These are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes, in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what we have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the barbarians from losing their due meed of glory; and withal to put on record what were their grounds of feuds" (I., 1, transl. George Rawlinson). And Thucydides states: "Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, beginning at the moment that it broke out, and believing that it would be a great war and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it" (I. 1, transl. Richard Crawley).

The reference to the author was a constant in most ancient firsthand historiographical works—that is, in those historiographical works that are not the result of reviewing previous books of history. So the tradition begun in the fifth century remained valid, for instance in the first century BC with Dionysus of Halicar-

nassus: "In some way against my own will, I'm obliged to introduce these preliminary personal observations that are a too common feature in the prefaces of historical works" (I., 1). This tradition was transmitted from the Greek world to the Jewish one in the first century AD, through the figure of Flavius Josephus, who starts by saying: "My name is Flavius Josephus, son of Mathias. Because of my origins, I am a Hebrew from Jerusalem; because of my profession, I am a priest. I offered my services against the Romans in the first part of the war and I was a forced spectator of the late ones" (1., 1). Continuing to the end of ancient times, we find Procopius of Caesarea, who lived in the sixth century AD: "Procopius of Caesarea has written the history of the different wars waged by Justinian, emperor of the Romans against the non-Romans of Orient and Occident. His object has been that of avoiding the situation in which very important events are exposed, without being registered, to the victorious attacks of the infinite time that threatened to throw them into the abyss of oblivion, where their memory would completely vanish" (1., 1).

In ancient historiography, historians considered it necessary to introduce themselves: that is the guarantee of their work's veracity. This is because historians shaped their work under a visual paradigm. The historian is, above all, someone who sees and hears the events and who is able to offer a reliable narration because he is a visual witness. In this sense, one could establish a clear parallel between historical research and legal inquiry. In both cases, one has to confirm an event of the near or far past whose main characters are totally or partially absent—the murderer can be present but not the victim; or, if both are present, one has to reconstruct an event of some time ago: an offense or a fault related in the protagonists' or witnesses' contradictory versions.

In Greek legal trials the witnesses' appearance, and the different speeches that they or the plaintiff and the accused developed in front of the popular jury, were fundamental; the idea of proof, on the contrary, was of relatively secondary importance.[1] (A proof in a trial transmits information that clarifies people's behavior in the past. The information is contained in the object, and this object is valid by itself.) Since that object is independent of the discourses of the parties involved, we moderns usually value its information more than the information contained in the litigants' discourses. But in Hellenic juridical practice this was not the case. That is probably one of the reasons why documents played a secondary role in classical historiography.

The Greek historian thought of himself as a witness who describes what he is seeing.[2] Therefore, the main methodological debate in Hellenic historiography was that between the eye and the ear, between the value of direct visual testimony and the value of the text. In general, one's own or another historian's visual testimony was preferred; the text had a secondary value, that of an inscription or a literary one. Besides, the Greeks considered that in the inscription or in the text

1. On this subject, see Paulo Butti di Lima, *L'Inchiesta e la prova: Immagine storiografica, pratica e giuridica e retorica nella Grecia classica* (Torino: Einaudi, 1996).

2. See André Sauge, *De l'épopée à l'histoire: Fondement de la notion d'historié* (Paris: Peter Lang, 1992).

there is always a subject that speaks, either the literary text's author or the inscription itself,[3] so we could say that for the Greeks the enunciating function has a privileged importance.

It seems clear, then, that in the Hellenic world the historian identified himself with a concrete person who makes references to his city, ancestry, or profession; it is his own person and his quality as visual witness that operates as a guarantee of the veracity of his information. Thus, to our question, "who is speaking in the historical text?" the ancients would answer that it was a witness to the events described. And to our question, "in what capacity is the historian speaking?" the answer is, as a direct observer.

In response to our questions of to whom the historian speaks, the ancients would answer that he talks to his fellow citizens with the aim of saving from oblivion a set of facts that he considers not only worth mentioning but also worth remembering. In this way, historians, as do the epic poets, free the people and the great facts of long ago from oblivion by making them the objects of remembrance. This makes clear the etymological connection between *alétheia* (truth) and *a-léthos* (the negation of oblivion).

The historian talks to his fellow citizens so they can recall the facts of the past not out of simple curiosity but in order to take from them a moral lesson. From this comes the role of the Ciceronian *historia magistra vitae* and its lessons always centered in the field of politics. The knowledge of history and geography is of great utility among the Greeks and Romans who, because of their birth or because of the magistracy they hold, will be dedicated to the government or to military activities. So Strabo points out in the first book of his *Geography.* Authors like Valerius Maximus select *Memorable Facts and Proverbs* that offer the public an easy-to-assimilate collection of them, and others like Polienus will gather in their *Stratagemata* tactics that are profitable for a general in a campaign.

Greek and Roman historiographies are basically political-military ones. In both worlds, history has no sense apart from the *polis* or *Roma Aeterna.* History is a literary genre inseparable from the exercise and reflection over *arché* (power). Its addressees are males, citizens and warriors who live in the world of the city and the world of politics—a world where oratory plays a key role in the judicial and political arenas; a world where the facts have sense only when framed in a discourse about political and personal identity, discourse to which the historiographical genre was destined to contribute.[4]

In this configuration of historical knowledge, it does not make much sense to set making history against talking about it. Many historians, such as Thucydides, Xenophon, or Flavius Josephus, "made" history as military men or generals. Moreover, in ancient times historiography was nothing but a way of talking, nothing but a literary genre. History, as shown by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, cannot be a part of philosophy, and so stays out of the kingdom of thinking and reflec-

3. See Jesper Svenbro, *Phrasikleia: Anthropologie de la lecture en Gréce ancienne* (Paris: La Découverte, 1988).

4. About the role of oratory in the *polis*, see Nicole Loraux, *L'invention d'Athènes: Histoire de l'oraison funèbre dans la cité classique* (Paris: Mouton, 1981).

tion. Doing and telling are related to each other as *praxis* and *legómena,* as political action and discourse about it—which are, in the last analysis, part and parcel of the same process. The ancient historian can be a traveler and a politician, like Herodotus; a magistrate and a military man, like Thucydides and Xenophon; or a priest engaged as soldier and politician, like Flavius Josephus, who because of defeat (Flavius Josephus and Polybius) or exile (Xenophon and probably Thucydides[5]), simply decides to stop making history and start thinking about it and, therefore, writing it.

Where one can find a tension is between writing history and thinking about the writing of history, because the latter is part of poetics and as such is one of the parts of philosophy. Thus a contrast can appear between some historians' active life (political activity) and the philosophical type of life (the *bíos theoretikós)* or the contemplative life that is most characteristic of a philosopher.[6]

The world of ancient historiography is, then, substantially different from the world of contemporary historiography.

II

The classical historiographical tradition disappeared with the end of the Roman Empire and with the diffusion of Christianity. In our genealogical travels in quest of understanding the commonplace distinction "making/talking," Christian tradition is an intermediate link between the ancient world and contemporary Europe. The power configuration developed in medieval and modern Europe will introduce some new elements that will enable us to understand the present situation.

If we study the third-century Christian historiographical tradition, we will see that two basic innovations were introduced. On the one hand, to the classical historiographical tradition with its military-political orientation is added a new historiographical genre: the history of the Church, begun by Eusebius of Caesarea. The beginning of the history of the Church implies a basic change in the conception of writing history, not just because a new subject is introduced (the ecclesiastic community), but because that community is associated with two new notions: the historical process and the sacred text.

The Christian community was, first of all, a community that, even though its origin was in a rather concrete place, spread all through the Mediterranean area and the Roman Empire. This community only became a coherent institutional machine as the Councils developed and, above all, after the primacy of the Bishop of Rome was established. Until then, the different churches developed their local traditions and rites, and gradually created their sacred text *corpora*; these were not unified until a canon was fixed in the fourth century AD. Only when this process was complete did the Church define itself as catholic, and only

5. Thucydides' exile—a historiographical commonplace established since ancient times—has been questioned by Luciano Canfora, *Le mystère Thucydide: Enquête à partir d'Aristote* (Paris: Desjonqueres, 1998).

6. About ancient philosophy, understood as a type of life, see Pierre Hadot, *¿Qué es la filosofía antigua?* [Paris, 1995] (Mexico City: FCE, 1998).

then did it appear as an institutional machine based on a common history as to its origins, its avatars through the prosecutions, and its triumph in a tradition that was supposedly shaped by the Gospels and Paul's Epistles.

This corpus of texts is added to the Old Testament, appropriated from the Jewish tradition by a Church that defines itself as the *verus* Israel, and that possesses its inspired nature in common with more recent writings. Both Testaments have been revealed by God; their texts have a value by themselves; they are beyond ordinary language; and they are objects of conservation, constant reading, and exegesis. The sacred texts are the receivers of the set of all truths; in this way the pagan literary canon is replaced by the Christian one. They give the only valid vision of the world; their authority cannot be dissociated from the authority of the Church—the only authorized interpreter of them, either through its Councils or through its wise men.

The history of the church is to be found in a set of texts and objects used as testimonies. The first Christian communities communicated with each other through epistles in which their founders, such as Paul, developed their doctrines and guided their evolution. In the age of the prosecutions, Church historians collected the testimonies of the martyrs, either recording the Acts of their trials or keeping their relics.

The relic and the act are objects: a fragment of a body, a piece of cloth, or a written text that contains a truth in itself and possesses a value in itself. That is why relics are kept, collected, and exchanged; and why the texts are transmitted or produced, creating a whole type of literature: the *hagiography*, in which martyrs and the (real or imaginary) saints play a key role as prestige instruments of those institutions (monasteries, cathedrals) that either are the receivers of their remains or plot a story to set them in relation to themselves.

Relics and texts create the substratum from which not only historiographical activity is developed but also from which that activity is related to social and power relations. From the object and the text one can go to the real world because the real world is based in the possession of some objects and in the exegesis of some texts. Those objects and texts also make reference to the past, to the origins: the Gospels, the time of the prosecutions, the Acts, and to the institutional development of the Church, the description of heresies, Councils, and so on.

The history of the Church is then shaped in a way substantially different from classical historiography, because it is not generated from direct testimony in the same sense as in the Greek tradition. The Evangelists are supposed to be contemporaries of Christ, but in their texts their personal testimony is not so interesting because their framework must contain not only historical elements but also scriptural ones: Jesus' life fulfills the ancient prophets' prophecies. Thus a text—the Old Testament—prevailed over the described facts. Besides, the facts that are described do not refer to just any person, nor can they ever be repeated, as can those described by classical historians; they took place only once in history and they have only one protagonist. That protagonist, those facts, and those texts have a sacred value that is the origin of the sense of the historical process and that works as the basis for the existing social order.

The Christian authors, following the ancient philologists' labor and the exegetic activity developed in Judaism by Philon of Alexandria, developed the hermeneutics of the sacred texts. It begins with the existence of a text *corpus* that hides different types of truths about the world and humanity, among them, the secret of the historical process: its sense, identified with the "history of salvation." Those texts—recipients of historical reality—also have to be interpreted in accordance with only one method, the correct or orthodox method of reading, a method embodied in the institution of the Church that develops its interpretive tradition.[7] The text cannot be dissociated from a reading method and, at the same time, text and method are inseparable from an institution.

This configuration of knowledge is particularly interesting for us, genealogists of contemporary knowledge, because here we find the root of the "historical method"' or at least one of its roots. If we examine the configuration of historical knowledge about the Church in Christianity in accordance with our opening four questions, we will see that in relation to the first (who is speaking?), the classical historian who announces himself as located in a particular space and time is replaced by an absent narrator who describes the creation of the world in Genesis—in fact, who could have been there?—up through the foundation by Jesus of his Church to its triumph with Constantine the First. This is clearly the case in the work of Eusebius of Caesarea.

Of course, Eusebius is not talking to his fellow citizens but to the community of believers who are part of what he considers the orthodoxy, so that only by taking part at the beginning can we have access to the historical truth. He speaks in the capacity of an orthodox bishop, that is to say, as a person who knows the tradition of the sacred texts, who interprets them correctly, and also who is institutionally situated in the Church and politically in the empire in the party of the truth.

Christian history purports to be the "history of salvation." This history is identified with universal history as it was understood in the pagan tradition, that is to say reaching its highest point in the expansion of the Roman Empire; but it claims to surpass the pagan tradition the moment Saint Augustine in *De Civitate Dei* established the distinction between the two cities: that of the world and that of God. Both are intermingled, but the Augustinian theology of history enabled Christians to follow the trail of the city of God from its origins until the Last Judgment. In this way, Saint Augustine introduced another of the key notions of future Western historiographical tradition, namely, progress.

History is not only a progress that can be described in a narrative, but a process endowed with a profound sense. If we deal with the proper text corpus—in this case both Testaments—and we interpret it in accordance with the proper (or orthodox) method, we can grasp this sense hidden in the root of events. History is thereby transformed into something more than a mere narrative. History can

7. For philosophical analysis of hermeneutic activity, see Hans-Georg Gadamer,*Verdad y método,* I and II, (Salamanca: Sigueme, 1993) (*Truth and Method* [New York: Crossroad, 1990]; *Wahrheit und Methode* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1975]), and F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutique* (Paris: Du Cerf, 1987). (This is the edition of his courses of 1819, first published in 1838.)

no more be a mere literary genre that grasps progress; it is *the* method that gives us the key to true being. Augustinian theology of history surpasses not only historiography but also ancient philosophy, as Christianity had surpassed paganism. Sacred history is knowledge of philosophical profundity, the remaining history of events, as Orosius will describe it.

This configuration of historical knowledge will last in Europe until the early modern ages, when its most eminent representative is Bossuet. It will only lose its strength with the development of the Enlightenment and the birth of modern science.

III

If we seek to understand the present historiographical sphere, we must introduce a new notion, that of historical process. This can no longer be understood in Augustinian, and therefore transcendental, terms, but in strictly human terms and thus as possessing a purely immanent character.

With the development of humanism there was a return to the classical historiographical tradition. It is well known that the thinkers who begin the modern tradition of the analysis of power, such as Machiavelli in his *Discourses about the First Decade of Titus Livius* and Thomas Hobbes in his translation of Thucydides, drank once again of the Greek and Roman historiographical spring. They did so with the purpose of becoming emancipated from the weight of the Augustinian historiographical tradition. This coming back to the classical tradition was in part an attempt to understand historical development as a merely human process, and therefore an exclusively worldly one, in which its sense was given by the very events themselves and not by transcendental circumstances alien to them.

This humanist historiographical tradition was fulfilled in the Enlightenment with Voltaire's *The Philosophy of History*—an answer to Bossuet's *Discourse on Universal History*. The aim of *The Philosophy of History* was to uncover a hidden sense in human events that could be formulated as (one of) a set of laws of the historical process itself. The new protagonist of this process, humankind, finds complete sense in the development of its own defining powers. Voltaire, Condorcet, and Turgot all saw this development as the structuring law of the historical process.

But this formulation of historical knowledge would have not been possible if modern physics had not been developed in a parallel way, particularly in its canonical Newtonian formulation. The development of mathematical physics—achieved thanks to a conceptualization of the world as a *res extensa*, and thanks to the reduction of the bodies of the physical world to a set of attributes that can be mathematically formulated—underwrote the idea of *scientific method.* Since the end of the seventeenth century, the "certain way of science," to use an expression so much loved by Kant, allowed different types of knowledge to develop in accordance with some absolutely certain rules, which, combined with the thorough observation of facts, are the steady guarantee of our success. Modern physics therefore unites observation or description and analysis, and thanks to both can also make some predictions, as in the case of Halley's comet, whose return was considered the definitive confirmation of Newtonian physics.

In the field of the human sciences, authors such as Hume in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* tried to develop a science of the human being equivalent to Newtonian physics; this tradition continued in the nineteenth century by authors who sought to create new sciences that would replace the old history and thus become the summit of the pyramid of the sciences. This is most evident in Comte's *Cours de Philosophie Positive*, published in 1830. However, this transfiguration of history into what would be defined as science did not follow Hume's tracks but rather started from German historicism.

German historicists, headed by L. von Ranke,[8] conceived history as knowledge that designates itself as scientific thanks to a double process: an external one, in which historians' part would be limited, and an internal one, in which they are protagonists. The external process is inseparable from the State-Nation configuration, which took history as the ontological foundation of its existence (having lost its theological foundation in the Enlightenment), and in which the process of the institutionalization of history was to be developed in the different levels of education and in research of the state's monumental and documentary heritage. At an internal level—inseparable from the previous one—historical knowledge was to acquire a new configuration thanks to the introduction of two notions: that of document, or what we could define as the "documentary revolution"; and that of the scientific method.

The notion of a document is not an invention of the nineteenth century; we have already seen that it existed in ancient times and that Christian authors also made use of it. New was the *systematic* use of documents. Documentary criticism had been born in the seventeenth century in the field of Church history, with the aim of distinguishing in the hagiographies which documents were authentic among the great number of fakes. By the nineteenth century these methods, also used by classical philologists such as Ranke, were now to be applied to any type of source, creating in this way an unshakable basis on which historical knowledge could be reconstructed.

A great continuity exists between the Christian conception of the text and the conception of the text in contemporary historical discourse. In both cases, the notion of a textual corpus is used, and a correspondence is believed to exist between this corpus and reality. Reality is hidden in the body of the texts, which are not only a necessary condition for knowledge of it but also a sufficient condition; knowing them is enough. As the sacred text hid all possible truths, the historical text keeps them in its bosom.

The text is the place of the truth, but to make this truth clear it is necessary to read and interpret it. There are methods of reading and translation if the text is in another language. But there must also be hermeneutic methods, or methods of interpretation: those that constitute the "historian's job." What are these methods? In the Christian tradition, the hermeneutic operation is understood as a reading operation. Historians, as well as exegetes of the sacred text, also read, but

8. See Leonard Krieger, *Ranke: The Meaning of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

they think they are doing more than reading because they start from reading the sources and transferring their information to their own texts, thus evoking or resuscitating the past.

It is interesting to note that until quite recently—until the last twenty years with its development of narrativism—historians have denigrated the importance of reading documents and of writing historical texts. The German historicists, particularly Ranke, follow the visual paradigm that, as we saw, was characteristic of classical historiography. Historians supposedly saw the past through documents and transferred that vision directly to their texts, without any linguistic, ideological, or psychological obstacle. In his metaphors Ranke even compared historians' mission with a priest's mission and their panoptical vision with God's. In fact, only God could be the true historian, because he is the only one who can contemplate the whole historical process and give an account of its sense.

We do not need to step in now in the complex elaboration process of historical knowledge that goes from the setting-up and reading of some sources up to the interpretation of the sense of history.[9] But we should highlight its final phase that consists in recognizing that in a text a mutual correspondence does not exist between its statements and their referents.

A historical statement does not refer only to a real fact, as when we say, "the cat is on the carpet." We have to distinguish three different levels of meaning in it. A historical statement—that usually results from reading one or more documents or from analyzing a set of objects—has, first, a *reference*. So when we say, "The Wehrmacht was defeated in Stalingrad," we are referring to the concrete result of a particular battle that took place in a concrete moment and a concrete place. But if we include the battle of Stalingrad in a framework that gives it a sense—say, the Second World War—we can pass from the reference of the statement to its second level of meaning, that of its *sense*. The only way for a historical event to reach this level is to be included in a narrative.[10] This does not mean that the narrative creates events from the void. Events and the narratives in which they figure stand in a dialectical relation. But the narrative has a certain priority, since it is in the narrative where the language to describe an event is established, through which the historian speaks. A non-stated fact, a fact reduced to the kingdom of silence, can never become a historical event if it does not cross the language barrier.

But apart from these two levels of meaning we have to distinguish a third one. It is the symbolic *connotation* of the statement that sets it in contact with the set of value systems, symbols, and feelings typical in different national, ethnic, religious, cultural, or genre communities. For the Germans, Stalingrad evokes a set of feelings and ideas opposite to those evoked for the Soviets, or for people who regard the war from a pacifist perspective.

9. I have tried to analyze this process in my book, *Fundamentación lógica de la historia* (Madrid: Akal, 1991).

10. In this sense, see Miguel Morey, *El orden de los acontecimientos: Sobre el saber narrativo* (Barcelona: Peninsula, 1988); and the set of Paul Ricoeur's works compiled in *Historia y narratividad* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1999).

These three levels of meaning break the stability of meaning of historical statements and transform them into open or fuzzy statements, in which it is particularly difficult to establish their meanings in a unique form. This means that the idea that a historical method exists is hardly sustainable because the possibility of interpretation always remains open. Every text can be read in different ways; there is not only one kind of hermeneutics to its reading, and starting from this reading it is possible to make different rational (as well as irrational) reconstructions of the past.

But why do historians believe that there is only one method that allows them to make history, and that distinguishes them from those who are limited to talking about it? In the case of the history of the Church we saw that the key for a correct reading of the sacred texts was given by a previous compromise, one that places the reader in the orthodox tradition. This reading had to do with a certain type of interpretation. In the case of the historian there is something similar. The historian is supposedly capable of carrying out the right reading of a text because it is placed in a hermeneutic tradition that, as in the case of the Christian believer, is determined by its belonging to a certain community: in this case, the so-called scientific community.

The text is the place of the truth; in it is the possibility of its being stated. But that potential only becomes actual if interpreters produce a discourse acceptable inside the historians' community. This might mean, as in the realist tradition, that the truth is out there—in the world and in the text. But this would be somewhat misleading, as the world does not produce statements; it is we, the speakers and our linguistic communities, who produce them, who express the truth on the basis of consent.

Also, the truth in a historical text is articulated on different levels. A historical statement is true because of its capacity to refer to an event in certain spatiotemporal coordinates. But this truth, stated in ancient times by the visual witness, is only open to modern historians on the basis of their work on the sources. Moreover, historical statements are true in a secondary sense, namely, as revealing the sense of events. This second type of truth is only generated in a discourse belonging to a certain hermeneutic tradition. And the third type of truth—one that captures the connotations of an event described in a certain way—is itself only produced via the symbolic association of particular communities.

Historians, however, seem to prefer an ontological conception of truth, as conceived by Martin Heidegger.[11] They think they can state and savor the same things. Nevertheless, given what we have seen, this is nothing but an illusion, perhaps created by the capacity of historical narration to produce the "reality effect" as described by Roland Barthes. It also fulfills an ideological mission, as in this way the historical narrative supposedly produces a certain social conception of reality that will be supported by different political powers through its diffusion in education and in different discourses and means of propaganda, inseparable from the exercise of power.

Historians who "make history" are, therefore, apparently sure of their jobs, for three reasons. First, because they think that there is a reality that works as a ref-

11. See Martin Heidegger, *La pregunta por la cosa* [1963] (Buenos Aires: Editorial Alfa Argentina, 1975).

erent of their statements. Second, because they think they have access to that reality through the historical sources whose transmission seems to be ruled by a sort of providential law responsible for transmitting globally enough sources to make historical knowledge possible. Those sources are the set of the text corpora. And third, because history can be made because those corpora can be read and interpreted through a method. Behind this attitude is the thought that history is basically *a way of talking* about the past that can be developed orally, in classical historiography and in present oral history, or through the use of documentary sources, either archaeological or artistic.

However, the use of sources complicates this way of talking, because historians cannot narrate what they saw or what they remember, but only interpret how others beheld it, creating different discourses in order to fashion their own discourse about a referent invisible by definition. In this way, ontological security is snatched from professional historians: their work is just one instance of rational conversation among individuals and groups. This insight might force them to give up, perhaps, that disdain with which those who "make history" treat those "metahistorians" dedicated only to talking about how history is written. In any case, in order to complete the picture we must reflect on what the significance of talking about history is, and whether one can expect an academic community to arise from it.

IV

Historiographical texts have typically been read in either of two ways. First, they have been read as manifestations of historical method; in this case they are analyzed by using the sources and methodology to read the notes and to comprehend the historiographical references. Or second, they can be read as manifestations of historical reality itself, which we learn about as we read the text. In this case, not only is the historical text disregarded but also the operation of reading it, because here the text ceases to be a text: it is a window on reality itself. Thus in both approaches the textual character of history is downplayed.

In contrast to these positions, I want to emphasize the peculiar textual character of the historiographical work. But once one has recognized this textuality, the real problem arises: can one speak of a method for analyzing historiographical works? And if so, what is this method? Two antithetical answers to this question have been provided. The first takes history to be a science, in which case the method that allows us to analyze historiographical works would be the philosophy of science. The second takes history to be a humanistic text, in which case the disciplines of rhetoric and literary criticism would account for historiographical works. In both these cases we would find that in addition to historians there would rise scientific communities of either philosophers of science or theoreticians of literature who would offer an account of what in fact is a historiographical work.

I do not need to examine the validity of these two proposals before offering my own. But as an aside I do wish to note that, concerning the first, nowadays philosophy of science is characterized by not being able to establish a set of minimal

conditions that allows one to distinguish a science from what is not a science. Because of this, the sociology of science and ethnomethodology, which center their attention on the analysis of scientific communities, their values, their beliefs, and their concrete working methods, are becoming more and more important.[12] Moreover, it also seems evident that the present philosophy of science scarcely contributes to the modification of scientists' praxis, but is limited to analyzing it. History cannot have any hope for its renovation from the philosophy of science; at most it can hope only to become conscious of its inner functioning.

Concerning the theory of literature it seems to be clear, in spite of the pretensions to hegemony of literary critics—above all in the US—that the mere theory of literature can give an account neither of all the dimensions of historians' work nor even of literary work. The so-called "new historicism" has made it clear in this field how for the comprehension of literary works it is necessary to refer to the historical contexts in which those texts make sense.[13] Economical and social relations, the world of values, collective beliefs, and psychology are basic to reaching a full comprehension of the literary text. We can justifiably say the same about the historical text, in the production of which the historian is conditioned not only by the tropes of language and the types of plot (analyzed by Hayden White[14]), but also by constant reference to the sources and by the use of consensual methods.

Thus we will have to agree with the practitioners of history: those who talk about the history of historiography do not have a method, and maybe because of that they are not a scientific community. In fact, theoreticians of history have several different origins: either they are historians (which today is not the main tendency), or philosophers, or literary critics (quite usual among the narrativists). Anyway, it is quite strange to find a full-time professional working in this branch of historical knowledge, since each type of historiography is mainly cultivated by specialists in the corresponding age's history. Perhaps the most that can be said is that the "methods" of historiography are at most fuzzy.

But what can we expect of fuzzy methods? The answer to this is complicated by the fact that metahistory has included a number of different disciplines. Let us see which ones.

At the lowest level is the history of historiography. This has to work at a more concrete level and go up a little above the simple bibliographical study of the works about an age or a certain problem. This discipline analyzes historiographical production historically—its social, ideological, or whatever determining factors, as well as the historical impact of historiographical works. To do this, however, it must have some type of theory about the sort of processes and works that

12. For overviews, see Javier Echeverria, *Filosofía de la ciencia* (Madrid: Akal, 1995); Emilio Lamo de Espinosa, José Maria González Garcia, and Cristobal Torres Albero, *La sociologia del conocimiento y de la ciencia* (Madrid: Alianza, 1994); and José A. Diez and C. Ulises Moulines, *Fundamentos de filosofía de la ciencia* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1997).

13. On this movement see Paul Hamilton, *Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1989).

14. About these limitations, see my "L'architecture de l'imagination," *Storia de la storiografia* 25 (1994), 103-120.

it is analyzing, and therefore historiography is sometimes intermingled with the methodology of history.

The methodology of history, besides having a normative dimension or, what is the same, besides being formed by a set of rules that explain how history can be made, also has a historiographical dimension and a theoretical side. It has a historiographical dimension because to formulate these recipes it has to start from a corpus of existing historiographical works. And it has a theoretical dimension because every normative enterprise needs, as an example, a theoretical model to be developed.

But where would theory be situated? In some instances, the word "theory" is used in an epistemological sense, so theory and epistemology of history could be considered as the same thing, such that epistemology of history is close to general epistemology or to the philosophy of science. But in other cases—this used to happen in the tradition of historical materialism—the word "theory" referred not to the descriptive aspect of history but to its interpretive aspect, to the science defined as a specific discipline and so named "historical materialism." This is a science that follows the tradition of Hegelian philosophy of history, which claims to provide clues for the comprehension of the historical process, and that sometimes can even be almost divorced from the historiographical tradition, as E. P. Thompson denounced.[15]

We have then a field of study, common to the history of historiography, to the methodology, and to the theory of history, in which starting from historiographical works one would have to understand their mechanisms of production, diffusion, and assimilation; their inner structure; and also the elaborate rules for their production. In order to do all this one requires historical knowledge but also another sort of knowledge, basically a philosophical and a literary one.

Is this situation satisfactory? Seemingly not, because historians privilege making history over thinking or talking about it, because they consider that this type of reflection is not carried out with adequate method, and because its object does not correspond to the task that suits the historian, that is to say, that of telling and analyzing events. Nowadays, when we pose our four questions to modern historians—in contrast with ancient ones—they consider that it is not fitting to ask who is talking, because either nobody is talking in a text of history or, metaphorically, it is the past itself that talks. It does not matter who is talking because, as we have a method, what the historian is saying could be said by any other historian. That is precisely what is intended, to annul the talking subject and to replace him or her with an absent narrator.

Historians talk as professionals for their colleagues; or as patriots, in the case of national history; or as committed members in a political fight for socialism, for the equality between sexes, and so on. But against the opinion of historians, the change in themes, indeed the ontology of the historiographical discourse, does not change its basic foundation, its profound structure. In this situation, how should

15. In *Miseria de la teoría* (Barcelona: Editorial Critica, 1981) (*The Poverty of Theory* [London: Merlin Press, 1978]).

those who talk about history be situated? First, we do not know who they are: historians bored with their jobs, philosophers, literary critics, essayists. . . . It is difficult for them to constitute a community of dialogue, and consequently more difficult to constitute a scientific community, because, at the same time, all of them belong to other communities: philosophers, literary critics, historians. . . .

Although those who would talk about history have an object in common—historiographical texts—they do not have a single clear method to approach them. They would have this if there were a perfectly formalized theory of history. But lacking such a theory, metahistorians will have to work with metaphors and pretend that history is a science and so employ the philosophy of science, or pretend that history is a literary text and so employ literary criticism. The lack of definition and method only aggravate the situation.

On the other hand, to whom are metahistorians addressing their works? Perhaps to historians—but they do not pay much attention to them. Or perhaps to philosophers and literary critics, if they consider themselves similar to them. But most typically to themselves, to a nonexisting community formed by historians separated from the herd, skeptical or tired; by philosophers with historical interests—which classifies them as "light" philosophers; by literary critics with aims of expanding their discipline; and by some students of history who either try to get oriented or are not ready to accept being guided by well-worn ways. To constitute a scientific community on these foundations seems to be a bit hazardous. But maybe the problem does not lie there but in a very different place?

Scientific communities are historically constituted when a certain species of knowledge reaches an important level of development. Think, for instance, of the role played by the Royal Society, placed completely outside the university framework, in the foundation of modern science. What has priority is not, then, to be a scholarly community, but to limit a field of research in such a way that a new scientific community can be constituted out of it in the future.

But is it possible to create a field in which one can talk about history with a method? To answer this question affirmatively we would first have to break the dichotomy between making and talking in the field of history. History builds its objects starting from the constitution of its documentary corpora; it then develops different methods of reading and interpreting the texts, methods that are sometimes contradictory and that are not reducible to a common factor. History is fuzzy knowledge—in the sense used to talk about fuzzy logic—precisely according to the complexity of the phenomena it studies. Because of this, it cannot be closed knowledge; it cannot be a science, but only knowledge at a particular phase of its constitution. The closed character of historical knowledge is an optical illusion of historians, who confound the uses of their products with laws of universal value. Historians who think of history as based on a universal method are incapable of giving an account not only of historical development but also of the development of their own discipline, constantly influenced as it is by political, ideological, religious, genre, and all sorts of circumstances. One would have to apply to the biggest part of historians that famous phrase of Jesus on the

cross: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." In this situation, wanting to make history without talking about it is a suicidal proposal because it would undermine the ideological functions that since the last century have been assigned to history, and because it would empty history of the historical circumstances that are a condition of its existence.

Talking about history ought to imply, on the contrary, overcoming academic departments' self-named scientific communities and breaking the barriers among a set of disciplines that sometimes work with the same texts but which read them from mutually excluding perspectives. Talking about history is only possible if one knows about history and about its sources and methods, but also about the foundations of other social sciences and about the continuing importance of traditional philosophical problems of Western thought in the fields of history and the human sciences.

Fuzzy sets are characterized by not having clearly defined limits. To this type of set belong philosophy, history, and the social and human sciences. Theoretical reflection or dialogue about these different types of knowledge start not from their nuclei but from their outlines.[16] In fact, different intellectual movements, such as Marxism, postmodernism, and so on, equally affect philosophy, literary criticism, history, history of art, or anthropology. It will be then in these fuzzy zones, common to all these different types of knowledge, where one will have to settle, if that is not a contradiction. Probably we will have to wander among them and, as we converse with the walkers who wander along the same ways, establish a dialogue that allows us, if not to know the end of the route, at least to understand the other as we walk along these Heideggerian *Holzwege* whose value consists precisely in their not going anywhere. It is there, where the philosopher, the historian, and the social scientist can meet one another as they leave their homes, and where they will be able to breathe the air that allows them to live. Perhaps in those walks one might finally meet new species that could keep alive our longing for knowledge. In them we would be able to discover that the clue to many historiographical questions lies in posing old philosophical problems[17] and that philosophy itself and history share their basic problems with bigger sets of knowledge formed by the social and human sciences.

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16. About fuzzy logic, see Bart Kosko, *Pensamiento borroso* (Barcelona: Editorial Critica, 1995) (*Fuzzy Thinking: The New Science of Fuzzy Logic* [New York: Hyperion, 1993]).

17. I have explained this in some of my books. For historiographical interest in the philosophical problem of evil or the ontological argument, see my *Genealogia de la historia: Ensayos de historia teórica III* (Madrid: Akal, 1999), 226-241 and 361-382.