

## A proposal for how to look at the past

Interview with Frank Ankersmit (by Frode Molven)

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(Unfinished draft version).

*Frank Ankersmit is professor at the Department of History at Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. He has been writing essays and books on historical theory since the late 1970ies. His most recent book is *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford University Press 2005). His thinking takes form as essayistic variations on the forms of knowledge and other relations to the past, most often first appearing in shorter essays and then later in books. His “featured concepts” have changed from narrative/narrative logic to representation and then recently to experience. Summarizing a position is difficult but a position is of course a static thing and not as interesting as a movement within and around a problem complex. He has often been called a postmodernist, since he disconnects historical writing and truth. But he has no patience with the facile relativism and skepticism of the postmodernists. He has no doubts about the rationality of historical writing and believes it to be the philosopher of history’s main task to discover the nature of this rationality. Hence, of a rationality which has truth as its permanent companion, but never as its guide. He is inspired by Leibniz, Hegel, Danto, and, more recently by Davidson, but first and foremost takes his point of departure in the actual writing of history.*

FM: When reading *Sublime Historical Experience* I was reminded of a question you had last time we met: about what period I had dreamt of living in. Your question presupposed that I *too* was dreaming of the past, longing for a fuller presence in some way... In *Sublime Historical Experience* you come out of the closet as a full fledged Romantic, so there is a personal dimension to your thinking. Would you see this Romantic position as something underlying your whole line of production or is it something that you have arrived at or realized?

FA: I would say that it is something that I have arrived at. The first book I wrote, *Narrative Logic*, was so to speak an enlightened enterprise. It had the tonality, the enthusiasm and the expectations that you might associate with the Enlightenment. I had the feeling that I had finally

got the grasp of most of the essential problems that cluster around the mystery of historical knowledge and how historical language relates to the past. So it was a very optimistic book. It is very different with the *Sublime Historical Experience*, for as you correctly point out its tonality is quite different, it is a somber book, it is about loss and trauma, and about why loss and trauma give us the matrix for how we relate to the past. So in this respect it seems to question the optimism that was so much present in the first book.

FM: But already the shift from narrative logic to representation in your *History and tropology* (1994) seems significant in this change from Enlightenment to Romanticism, since representation means making something absent present again...

FA: No, that has to do with something different. My first book was influenced by the idea that an historical account is a narrative of the past, the idea that had also inspired Hayden White and Louis Mink and others. But I have always had a certain problem with people like White and Mink in the sense that they said “Well, if historical accounts are narrative, then you should also make use of literary theory in order to investigate it, for literary theory is the theory that deals with complex texts and that may give you the instruments for dealing with narrative.” I have always felt that since a historical narrative attempts to do justice to the past in a sense that you could not possibly say about a novel, the historian finds himself in a fundamentally different situation. And this is why I wanted to cut through all ties with literary theory and why, without changing conceptually or theoretically, I preferred to replace the term narrative by *representation*. Representation is a neutral term. I think it also quite adequately describes what an historian does – he gives a representation of the past in the sense of making the past present again. That is why we need historical writing. A representation is not necessarily a narrative; you have the so called cross-sectional studies, the famous example being Jacob Burckhardt’s *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* or Huizinga’s *The waning of the middle ages* or Braudel’s on the Mediterranean world. They do not tell a story, they do not give us a narrative with a certain beginning, middle and end, but they are historical works representing the past. Moreover, I soon decided to exploit the aestheticist connotations of the term ‘representation’; so my enterprise also took on the features of an exploration of the rationality of aesthetic representation. Since philosophers tended to forget that aesthetics is derived from the Greek word ‘aesthesis’ (meaning, roughly, experience) and to relate aesthetics exclusively they rarely asked themselves the question what variant of rationality might be discovered in (aesthetic) representation (Nelson Goodman being the best-known exception to this rule). So I tried to remedy this shortcoming in contemporary aesthetics.

FM: I will return to the question of representation later. In *Sublime Historical Experience* you open by saying that all your considerations on experience are meaningless and useless from a practical perspective, but in *History and Tropology* (1994, 123) you say that historiography is the birthplace of meaning... Would you say that the experience of history is of no use for the actual writing of history?

FA: Well, the theory of historical representation might make clear to the historian the nature of what he is actually doing, where he differs from several other discipline -- something which is very important for historians since historians are always a bit uncertain about themselves and about how the discipline relates to other disciplines. A philosophy of history might be helpful to the historian in a way that I think you could not say about philosophy of science: In the sciences you know what you have to do and then the philosopher of science may write all kinds of very complicated treatises on what one does in the sciences. But it is completely correct of the scientist never to read such treatises. Whereas the interaction with philosophy of history and the actual writing of history is much more intimate and much closer. And this is how it ought to be. There is some deep truth in Croce's argument doing history is, in a way, doing philosophy. You will find the same insight in Walsh's claim of the similarities of metaphysics and the writing of history: in both cases truth is your permanent companion, but never your guide.

On the other hand, the notion of historical *experience* has nothing to do with the practice of historical writing, which is something of a completely different order... Historical experience has no cognitive import. If you think about this notion of experience then you should cut the ties between experience on the one hand and truth on the other. Of course there are certain people who have written on historical experience, especially Huizinga with his notion of historical sensation: he says it's the highest moment of historical knowing -- that's his view, but I wouldn't subscribe to that.

Historical experience is not wholly unrelated to truth, though; in the book I have this metaphor: having an historical experience is as if you hear a gunshot. It makes you look up in a certain direction, it makes you aware of something, but what you will see there, is in no way suggested by the historical experience itself. It has only a causal relation to what a historian might do, no semantic relation to what he will write about.

FOLLOW UP: FM: It think it was in *History and Tropology* you wrote in nostalgia. How would you see the relation between nostalgia and historical experience?

FA: One may distinguish between two variants of nostalgia. There is the variant where you wish to forget about the distance between yourself and the object of nostalgic yearning. In the other variant one is permanently and painfully aware of this distance – and the whole drift of nostalgia is the always unsuccessful attempt to overcome this distance. This is the kind of nostalgia that I would primarily associate with historical experience: historical experience is the experience of the distance between, or the difference between past and present.

FOLLOW UP 2: FM: What separates “normal” or “everyday” historical experience from the sublime?

FA: I am not sure whether there exists a ‘normal’ or ‘everyday’ form of historical experience. Perhaps one could say this about the historian’s experience of his sources and documents. But this is not an experience of the past, since you have this experience in the present. Sublime historical experience is, however, an experience of the past itself.

FM: Modern writing of history comes from seeing the dimension of unintended consequences. But aren’t insights into unintended consequences already to be found in the Greek tragedies? I think Bernard Williams would say so, at least he comes close to that in his very interesting book *Shame & Necessity*: about how modern the Greeks were...

FA: The difference is that the issue of unintended consequences in modern times always has to do with the notion of guilt and of responsibility – and that is different in antiquity. Bruno Snell claims in his famous book *Die Entdeckung des Geistes*, that what we would see as the most fundamental characteristic of human beings, what really goes to the heart of individuality, would for a Greek precisely be an expression of the gods. So when something like an unintended consequence would appear, when someone – like Guicciardini in the 15th century – feels desperate about what he has done, the Greeks would say that it belongs to the responsibility of the gods. What was so new about Guicciardini was that he felt that he was responsible himself for the tragedy of *Sacco di Roma*, and he asked himself: How could I have made such a terrible mistake? And then he started to write his history of Italy in order to find out how this happened. Such a responsibility would never have appeared to the Greek mind.

NEW QUESTION FM: And this leads us into another shock of unintentionality, the French Revolution. You have this theory about three or four kinds of trauma and relate this to the writing of history – could you explain?

FA: I would like to distinguish between two kinds of historical experience. In the first place there is the kind of historical experience that Huizinga had in mind; and where the distance between past and present suddenly seems to drop away. You then find yourself literally eye to eye with the past itself. The other kind of historical experience has to do with how the past, as such, comes into being. I mean, the past is not something that is self-evidently given to us in the way that chairs and trees are. Initially there merely is an all-encompassing present. But then we may feel tempted to draw some line right through this all-encompassing present dividing it up into a present and a past. This may happen during the great historical ruptures that Western civilization experienced – think of the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance or of what the French and the Industrial Revolution effected around 1800. Large parts of an all-encompassing present were then suddenly cut off from the present; these parts came to lie opposite to us – they became objects of future historical investigation. Observe, next, that this dividing up of an all-encompassing present into a (new) present and a past involved the loss of large of that hitherto all-encompassing present. This is why this kind of historical experience is always an experience of loss - and, hence, of trauma. You then truly lose parts of a (former) identity – and can one get closer to death than by losing one's identity?

FM: The French Revolution was a colossal example of what Arthur Danto has aptly called “the transfiguration of the commonplace”...

FA: Yes, you are suddenly able to see the period from the outside and only then has it become history and only then can you write history about it. In the movie *The Truman Show* you have this perspective shift: everything that is private person turns out to be public. And then you of course have to rearrange completely your personality and identity.

FM: As a Norwegian, from Europe's far north, I kind of envy you all the bloodshed and tragedies that obviously creates an acute historical consciousness and great writing of history. In Norway the birth of history wasn't traumatic, in your sense – at least not at first glance. The starting point was optimism, rather, since we got a democratic constitution and a parliament of our own as early as 1814. This was not exactly historical suffering. I would say that ideas in Norway at that

time were not produced by pain but by pleasure, to reverse the quote from Proust. The problems started when we begun looking in detail at what Norwegian identity was, in history, especially during the Danish rule. Then real narrative representation (not just mimetic presentation of the sagas) became necessary. And this is why our first real historian – in the sense of not starting out from any ahistorical substance -- is Johan Ernst Sars in the 1870ies. The so called Norwegian historical school, contemporary with the German, was a name only. Sars is the first historian to fully realize that he had to cope with the process of becoming what one is not longer. There was not a traumatic shift of periods in Norway, no profound transfiguration of the commonplace – as compared to Denmark, for instance, where among else the loss of Norway took part in a traumatic experience. In 1814 we could start again with the golden Norse age, as a kind of mirror for the future, and only later something traumatic came up with the possible loss of a Norwegian identity in the Danish period...

FA: From this perspective your history is closer to that of the English and the Americans. I wrote on this difference in *Sublime Historical Experience* and I got several irritated comments from my colleagues in the United States: I had the feeling that they thought I postulated something for Europe that they wanted for themselves! I am working on an article on Rorty right now and he has of course a profound sense of history that is partly why he was not popular among his American colleagues. But his sense of history is so Whiggish: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is a happy story with a good end. It ends with the pragmatist attitude of Dewey which Rorty himself advocates. But that he was writing whiggish history never occurred to him, I think -- it comes natural to Americans. Whatever American you have, even Rorty: Scratch them and a Jeffersonian liberal presents himself. And this is different with Europe, especially with intellectuals like Clarendon and Tocqueville and the French historians after the French Revolution.

FM: And this patriotism makes it possible still in Norway to write patriotic history as a matter of course. Just a few months ago an historian published a book of glorious portraits of excellent Norwegians during the Danish era...

FA: Then you have a different conception of history, you don't struggle with it. Tocqueville represents the opposite: He recognized that Europe had been through an historical crisis – the French revolution – but something came out of it, and you just must try to continue, however difficult it is. And this wouldn't make any sense to an Englishman or an American. Think of how Tocqueville once described his most basic political convictions: ‘j'ai pour les institutions

démocratiques un goût de tête, mais je suis aristocrate par instinct; c'est à dire que je méprise et crains la foule. J'aime avec passion la liberté, la légalité, le respect des droits, mais non la démocratie. Voilà le fond de l'âme'. His heart still was with the aristocratic world of the Ancien Regime; but intellectually he knew that democracy was the inevitable truth for his own time and that he had to accept it for better or for worse. The Anglo-Saxons never experienced this brute opposition between heart and intellect. And this is why there always is a certain flatness and lack of depth in their relationship to the past, and that is only overcome in the writings of people like Tocqueville, Burckhardt or Huizinga.

FM: In Norway we had a lighter Romanticism or a strong blend with Enlightenment ideas, the future being formable, open and maybe more important than history. Let's get rid of the past...

FA: Yes, but even then you would have to think about loss. In one of the most marvelous passages ever written on historical consciousness, Hegel writes on the change in the Greek *Sittlichkeit* caused by the death of Socrates. Socrates was also an enlightened person in a certain sense. In the Enlightenment as such, that you have to move on from one phase to another, and even when the later phase is always better than the previous ones – which is the case of course of this move from the objective to the subjective mind in Hegel's story – nevertheless may have this character that you *lose* a former identity. Perhaps the former identity was not as good as the new one, but nevertheless it was the kind of person that *you were*. So you die a partial death at that moment. Even if you have this progressive Whiggish view of history, you might come across this feeling of loss.

NEW QUESTION FM: So you in fact suggest that even a robust Enlightenment attitude to history might experience trauma. I come to think of the very important Norwegian politician Falsen, in the early 19th century. He experienced something like Guicciardini on a smaller scale: He was a strong proponent of the Norwegian farmer and farmers coming to power in Norway, seeing them as a direct link with the glorious Norse age – and an hope for the future. But when he met the real farmers as colleagues in the parliament, when they got power, they opposed all his politics – and then he retired to write the history of Norway; not in Guicciardinis sense of trying to overcome and understand, but like in the trauma 1; as what you would call a reactionary: He told the past *to be a part of it*, not first and foremost to get knowledge of it.



FA: I would have to know a little more about Falsen to answer your question. But perhaps I should say just this: in my view there has to be a similarity or continuity between what such an individual statesman has to go through at such moments and what seems to be his times ‘manifest destiny’ so to speak. For only then may his personal experiences get the overwhelming depth of the kind of historical experience that Hegel must have had in mind when discussing the conflict between Socrates and the Athenian State.

FM: You have a beautiful but unanswered question on page 350 of SHE, it seems to me, when you say that “at such moments it must be to us as if we were moving faster than time itself, for ... seeing together and ... faster than time”.

FA: This is the Danto argument: When something in the past becomes objectified as an historical period, then you are so to speak moving faster than time in the sense that you are making the move which *creates* historical time and is the cause of it. Danto describes what achieves the shift from one period to another, and only then you see the effects.

The French Revolution caused the loss of a previous world and one had to digest this loss and find a way of living with this loss. And this is why you have this explosion of historical representations of the French Revolution... by Michelet, Tocqueville, Lamartine, Thierry etc etc

FM: So these works are – to use a concept much favored by Dominick La Capra – a kind of *working through of collective trauma*...

FA: Yes, exactly.

FM: But when it comes to more recent events, such as the Holocaust, you have criticized La Capra’s application of the concept of collective trauma.

FA: Yes, trauma has to do with loss. When it comes to the Holocaust, on a personal scale the loss was terrible; surviving individuals had traumatic memories of what happened in the death camps. But when you look at it from the perspective of European civilization, we didn’t *lose* that with the concentration camps, which were very dear to us. On the contrary: we were very happy when it was over. It was therefore a completely different situation in which Tocqueville found himself when he had accepted democracy; it took an enormous amount of pain to take leave with



the world of the *ancien regime* and make a peace with democracy. But what person in his good sense would find it difficult to take leave with Hitler?

FM: Such a difficulty would imply that Hitler was part of our identity, in some way integral to it...

FA: La Capra would have to say that. But I find the idea wholly ridiculous. It has a variant which is defended by Jörn Rüsen; he says that what we lost in the Holocaust was our trust in humanism. For me the Holocaust is an *extra* reason to be a humanist.

FM: I will move on to my questions on representation. In Norway discussions go on the usefulness of the literary analysis of the writing of history, Hayden White being well known as a name and for many an irresponsible postmodernist and relativist. All this aside, I find representation more useful than White's perspective in *Metahistory*, which is of course unique but not very applicable. You see historical representation as a *proposal* as to what reality is like. The historical representation is a personal proposal inspired by the historian who gives it and it is not true or false.

FA: The historian writes a proposal to look at the past from a certain perspective. And proposals are neither true nor false, logically speaking. You could say that my proposal to use an umbrella when it is raining is a good idea, but it is not *true*, as something which corresponds to facts. I have this argument in *Narrative Logic* and there I tend to be rather strict on truth in order to find out where something happens in historical writing that cannot be accounted for in terms of truth and falsity. But nevertheless, it leaves room for historical rationality. I am convinced of the rationality of historical writing, I am convinced that we know more of the past than 100 years ago, I am convinced of progress of historical writing – but also that the notion of truth is of no help if we wish to account for these things. Historians are simply *swamped* by historical truths, they are everywhere and it is easy to enlarge our inventory of historical truths beyond a point that no historian could deal with it anymore. Truth is not the real problem with historical writing. What to *do* with these truths? – That is the real interesting question. That is also why I think historical writing is so awfully interesting, because it makes us aware of the fact that human reason has more strings to its bow than only this notion truth. And one of the weaknesses of contemporary philosophy of language is that they never bother to find out about this. We should make clear to mainstream philosophers of language what they lose and what they forget about when they are

not aware of the problems of historical writing. All contemporary philosophy of language is focusing on the relation between language and reality by way of singular statements, but they never ask themselves what the relationship between complex texts and reality is. What makes a complex text into an adequate representation of what it is about? Philosophy of language is a mere torso which needs completion.

FM: I find the notion of proposal very interesting, as a way to see history writing as proposals, first and foremost. If we were able in both scholarly and public debate to see them as proposals, we would have both more of a critical space and possible questions relevant to the work could emerge: What question is this work trying to answer and at what demand?

FA: Yes, when a proposal is accepted by everyone it is not seen as a proposal anymore, but as a rule.

FM: So a lack of discussion of what one might call “the propositional value” of history writing is or would be a problem for the historical discipline, wouldn't it?

FA: It is the end of history. Then you have a fixed relationship between language and the world. I think that the essence of historical writing is never fixed. That is the logical space in which the historian moves. The historian can say interesting things about the past and historical discussion can go on as long as there is not a fixed relation between historical writing and reality. As soon as that happens, then something has been ”solved” in a way, but it no longer belongs to the realm of history.

FM: But there is natural and perhaps very understandable tendencies within the discipline, to treat say a new book by an eminent historian on the German invasion of Poland as definitive, as the new rule. And to let one representation be the master representation, so to speak.

FA: Yes, historians always strive for that but if it is attained, you are no longer doing history. That is the potential tragedy of historical writing: If you have achieved your highest aims you are no longer historian.

FM: You mention somewhere the fact that artistic representation is always being ”helped” by the frame and the laws of perspective etc – but no such things exists for the historian. Some might

argue that the social sciences provide some help for the historian, but your reply would be that the social sciences are still too tied up with the Enlightenment dogma of the transparency of the social order and ethical political theories: Why is that?

FA: You can certainly use the social sciences but it will always concern the level of historical *research*: getting clarity about the facts. The distinction between research and writing is *absolutely basic* to all understanding of history: without this distinction you will not understand anything about what the historian is doing. The historian is always doing two different things which have a completely different logic: On the one hand, he is establishing the facts about the past – and there you have a whole range of instruments that can be of use, from the auxiliary sciences like chronology or Medieval Latin but also the social sciences. But *then* comes the phase where you integrate this into a synthesis, some kind of picture of the past – a proposal for how to look at the past. And that is typical of the historical writing and cannot be reduced to any social science.

NEW QUESTION FM: It might be said that the professional training of historians tends to focus on the one part only, on methodology only, but not on the writing itself, not on the art of bringing it all home...

FA: on the whole I would agree with you here. Historians are often insufficiently aware of the dimension of writing and that this is what one might well see as the historian's counterpart of the scientist's effort to achieve theory-formation. It is here that historical thinking actually takes place. On the other hand, as we all know, the training of the historian mainly consists in his having to write papers, essays etc. And this is how, in practice, he learns to become an accomplished historian.

NEW QUESTION FM: The openness or the artfulness of the writing process is perhaps a treat to the historian's identity as craftsman?

FA; Yes, you're quite right here.

NEW QUESTION FM: Your writings are surprising, imaginative, provocative, filled with unexpected examples. Danto's phrase of the transfiguration of the commonplace also strikes me as a good description for what you are doing when you write. You very often turn things around, shifts an angle or a perspective – especially in your articles, which I would like to see as essays in

the tradition from Bacon and Montaigne. Am I right that the process of writing itself is very important to you?

FA: well, that's hard to say. I mean, it's something that you can learn to a certain extent. On the other hand, I suppose that it will also require a certain innate talent and that some historians may possess to a greater extent than others. But I would not hesitate to insist that this is large part of what separates the truly great historians, say, the Gibbon's, the Burckhardt's or the Huizinga's, from their less gifted colleagues. Good writing is not merely the surface of the historical text, its rhetoric – it truly penetrates to issues of content as well. It's no different in the visual arts, of course.

FM: The relationship between history and politics has interested you for a long time. You are yourself a rather prominent politician in the Liberal Party. Regarding ethical political theories with no relationship to history you have a very strong attack on John Rawls. His philosophy is "a kind of self-motivating philosophy, not about anything of importance, but merely regulative."

FA: Yes, everything *truly* of interest is hidden behind the veil of ignorance. I heard a funny story from Raymond Geuss: A few years before Rawls' death, Geuss picked him up on the station in Cambridge to take him to a conference on international law. Geuss said "Professor Rawls, it is nice to see you! What are you going to talk about at the conference?" "Well," said Rawls, "I think I will start with the peace of Westphalia in 1548." "But that was in 1648!" said Geuss. "Oh really," said Rawls, "I couldn't care less."

I think that when somebody has this attitude, then you can't be a good political philosopher. Politics has to do with history, with the concrete details of how our state and society have come into being. This kind of ignorance is a signal to me that somehow his intellectual compass has gone wrong.

FM: But still he is very popular in political science and philosophy.

FA: This is why American contemporary political philosophy has condemned itself to complete idleness and useless abstraction.

FM: If historians are theoretically minded they tend to be acutely aware of the reference, the truth value, of historical writing. Your position is that the writing of history is not a science and does not produce knowledge in the proper sense of the word.

FA: Once again you have these two levels: On the one hand this level of historical research – there you have truth. So all the historian expresses about the past in terms of singular statements and descriptions have truth value. I make the distinction between true description and representation. In the case of the truth statement you can always distinguish between the subject term and the predicate term. If the predicate term fits with the subject term, if I say this table is one meter, "this table" is the subject and "is one meter" is the predicate, then you look at the table and if it is one meter, the statement is true. But if you have a representation, for example that painting over there by Guardi, you cannot indicate on the painting spots of paint that exclusively refer to reality and other spots of paint that only predicate properties to what is depicted by the painting. Both things always go together there. And this is why representation cannot be analyzed in terms of how the true statement relates to the world.

This is why the epistemological situation in which you find yourself when having to do with truth no longer exist when it comes to representation. You cannot say of representations that they are true. What you *can* say is that one representation is in a certain sense better than another and it is the task of the philosophy of history to clarify how one can be better in one way or another. And that is what I try to do with the notion of metaphor.

NEW QUESTION FM: I am of course interested in the criteria for one representation being better than another... Could you develop this point a little bit?

FA: You have better and less good metaphors. Compare these three metaphors: 1) 'the earth is a drawing room'; 2) 'the earth is a garden' and 3) 'the earth is a spaceship'. It will then be obvious that the last metaphor best captures the fact that that we have to be careful with our ecological environment. So the rationality of historical representation is, in the end, an issue having to be dealt with in terms of how we distinguish between better and less good metaphors. The last chapter of my book on narrative logic deals with the issue at length.

FM: A portrait of a person is always more similar to another portrait than to the person itself...

FA: Yes, this is the Nelson Goodman-thesis.

FM: Carlo Ginzburg has been very much against anything called postmodernism. But you see him and Le Roy Ladurie as postmodernists themselves, but not in a positive way: Microhistory is representation just representing itself: “they sort of just present their strokes or “absorb ”reality” into the representation itself?” (*History and Tropology*, 123).

FA: I became interested in Ginzburg and the microhistory after having written *Narrative logic*, and after writing such a book it is only natural to look for the best examples of what you are theorizing about: the large interpretive histories of the past, on the French Revolution or on colonial expansion, etc. – these are of course the big items in the history of the West. And then at the end of the 80ies I was suddenly struck by the popularity of the books on Menocchio, *The Cheese and the Worms* and Le Roy Ladurie. They did not concern very important events. So I was asking myself: Why should this be interesting, why should we read these books at all? And why can they make such an impact? What Ginzburg himself wrote on the subject to justify this kind of writing was not at all convincing. The best justification for microhistory is given by Foucault, which of course started the first microstory in his *Moi, Pierre Riviere...* About this man in the end of the 1830 (OK) who had murdered his whole family and was persecuted and the tried to explain something. Pierre Riviere did something forbidden; to explain himself in such a way was found more shocking than the killings itself. And in this way Riviere and Foucault shows you something on how the 19th century mind was like. But you don't find anything like that in Ginzburg. Ginzburg is a poor theoretician and when he writes on sjamanism going through all history he is purely speculative. So his criticism of Hayden White for postmodernism and lack of argumentative rigor is just Ginzburg slapping himself on the mouth.

FM: I come to think of a paper Allan Megill presented in Aarhus recently on regional history. Local history is poor history because the historian is in love with his object. Global history is too abstract but regional history may have better chances because of an inbuilt tension within the region, between a center and a periphery. Ginzburg is just in love with his object, like a local historian...

FA: Yes, and later on he tried to fill it in with this idea that there was a certain tradition of cosmological speculation, going back to Roman times and which came to the surface with Menocchio's speculation in *The Cheese and the Worms*. But that was not in the book itself. So he

had a problem to explain why we should read that book. There was a similar project by Natalie Zemon Davis on Martin Guerre...

FM: But that was a good book.

FA: Yes ....

FM: Apropos microhistory: Are there any limits to the forms and genres of historical representation? Could you have a historical representation in the form of an essay, a non narrative meditation...

FA: That would depend on the amount of history that you have. If you have a situation where no narrative exists already then it would be impossible to write a representation since a representation always requires the presences of others. And as long as you do not have other, competing representations a possible representation disintegrates into its constituent sentences. So the power of representation comes from the outside, as it were. The more filled with representations, the richer possibilities there are.

NEW QUESTION FM: This reminds me of one remarks made by the Danish-Norwegian historian Ludvig Holberg in the 18th century: He describes himself as a wanderer in a landscape being sometimes blossoming and other times dry and desolate. These being metaphors on the amount of representations to be found in the different eras. Is it possible to see a loss in the consciousness of representation with the professional Quellen Kritik – the landscape disappears, the Quellen lose their surroundings, to stay within the metaphor... I think it might be a phrase from a classical author but until the 19th century you very often see historians remark: “Even if this story isn’t true, it is educating/good.” This has of course to do with *magistra vitae* and morality, but might it show a consciousness of historical representation as more than singular statements only?

FA: well, I have no problem with Quellenkritik. As I said a moment ago, historians are swamped by historical truths – and this is how it ought to be. The more truths we have about the past, the better the historian’s representations of the past may become. And it is to Quellenkritik that we owe these truths about the past. But, obviously, one should not stop there and never forget that Quellenkritik is, in the end, the handmaiden for the writing of history.



FM: Some historians, like Simon Schama and Peter Englund tend to write about themselves, as essayists, in the first person.

What does that do with the representation, when it is also a representation of the historian?

FA: Well, I think it is inspired by the literary model. Schama tries to apply the form of the modernist novel. *Dead Certainties* starts with this governor of Massachusetts: He heard the story of a man being murdered and what shall I do now? And then you have the governor's stream of consciousness, like in Virginia Woolf. It is an interesting experiment, but I do understand that historians and theoreticians have their doubts about it.

FM: A question about narrative and causality. As I understand the Stoic and Natural Law tradition, causality is there much more clean cut and simple than after Romanticism, because then narrative itself is constituting history, it is not anymore statements on a more or less eternal substance. You get all these metaphors on organic life. And then causality gets much more obiquous.

FA: I think William Dray made a very wise remark on this issue when he said that we should always distinguish between explaining why and explaining how. Explaining *why* is traditional causality and you could explain this type of causal explanation in terms of the notorious covering law model for example; so I would have no problem with the covering law model on the level of historical research. But history also explains how something could come into being, and then you need a story, a representation, a narrative...

FM: But the cause and effect relationship is not as obvious or easy to see in a narrative...

FA: Why not? You could say in a novel that the breakdown on the stock exchange in 1929 caused the economic depression in Germany. That's cause and effect.

FM: Allan Megill writes on recounting and description versus explanation: Most often the historian recounts something...

FA: Yes, that would be explaining *how*. So the causal explanation in the Humean sense would be the stock exchange example. In the other kind of explaining, that is of *how* in Dray's sense, you need this recounting model that Allan proposes.

NEW QUESTION FM: To finish up, we might return to the opening remark. You left me perplexed with your question about my favorite period. Your answer was the 18th century. Why is the 18th century the century of your dreams?

FA: I confess that a great deal of idealization goes into this. Nevertheless, for me the world of the 18th century was a world of beauty and of unparalleled intellectual achievement. Think of Hume, Rousseau, Kant; think of the music of that time, and last but not least, think of the kind of furniture that was then made. Think of those clocks, chairs, commodes, writing-desks etc. Were ever more beautiful things made by the human hand? It was as if one had the sense of beauty in one's genes, in those days. Or think of these Bavarian Rococo churches – the Wieskirche being the most beautiful of them all.

NEW QUESTION FM: Does that longing make you a nostalgic, a conservative, or is all romantic longing close to getting reactionary?

Well, I'm a bit like Tocqueville here – and indeed my own taste is in most things rather aristocratic. I hate ugly and vulgar things. But I know that I am living now and that I have to adapt to my own time – even if I sometimes find this as difficult as it has probably been to Tocqueville.