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Why Remember the Historical Past?

Reflections on Historical Skepticism in our Times

by

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In raising the seemingly straightforward question, "Why remember the historical past?", my aim in this brief study is to reflect on skepticism concerning our present ability to grasp something of the "reality" of the historical past. If by the term "historical past" I mean a past which precedes the experience of any living individual and is open neither to personal nor to group recollection, then this historical past can never be an object of remembrance in any strict sense of the word. It is derived from the distant memory of others who lived in a different time and concerns, according to Cicero's apt expression, "actual occurrences remote from the recollection of our own age."¹ In its remoteness from current memory, the historical past is at best an indirect or "borrowed" memory which, however, is not lent to us as a distinctly identifiable thing, or as an event which is merely distant in time. The remoteness of the historical past assumes a specific character which, to be grasped, must be made palpable at two different poles of analysis constituted by the context of the investigator, on one hand, and that of the topic under investigation, on the other.

The specific character of remoteness of the historical past comes to light as soon as we begin to reflect on the possible discrepancy or incommensurability between these two poles. At one pole, that of the investigator, lies the discrepancy between the world of the investigator and the remote context that the investigation seeks to uncover. The attempt to retrieve the historical past is necessarily anchored in the here and now of present preoccupations incorporated in the language and gestures, the direct recollections, preoccupations and expectations of living individuals and groups caught up in the plurality of their current orientations. At the

¹ "[...] gesta res ab aetatis nostrae memoria remota"; CICERO, *De inventione*, I, xix, 27, trans. H.M. Hubbell (Loeb Classics. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U. Press 1949), p. 55.

other pole, that of the topic under investigation, what we refer to as the historical "past" immediately presents itself in the guise of a multitude of traces which, unlike memory in the strict sense, is not open to direct recall but only to indirect verification which in the last analysis depends upon the source from which it is drawn. The source which is selected, in turn, can never be definitive, for it represents only that aspect of the past which has been retained in the form of documents, monuments or other traces drawn from the infinite manifold which constitutes the "reality" of the historical past itself.

The margin of discrepancy or incommensurability between these two poles of the investigator and the topic under investigation lies at the heart of an ever deepening paradox. This paradox, which has come to light with ever greater clarity since the first attempts to provide a rigorous foundation for historical understanding beginning in the late 19th century, lies precisely in the opacity of a remote past which, as the price of intelligibility to the present that investigates it, continually risks disappearing as it is assimilated to the logic and sensibility of the period in which it is investigated. The modes of reasoning and the specific sensibilities which predominate in a given present, couched in its linguistic categories and idioms, are easily, if often unwittingly, taken to be transposable into a past in which they are alien. They are tacitly presumed to be standards of commensurability through which the past may be made intelligible to the present and, as it were, "remembered". Surely, anachronistic distortions of historical analysis may be unmasked by the painstaking work of critical analysis. But such a possibility has hardly abated the dilemma of historical understanding in the contemporary era, since it seems to risk removing the husk of present categories without finding the remote kernel that supposedly lies within it, thus only exacerbating the paradox it set out to resolve, while leaving the lingering suspicion that the historical past itself lies entirely beyond our purview. This has led to a deep current of skepticism concerning historical understanding stemming from the suspicion that the historian's representations are only so many artificial constructions which more precisely express current assumptions about the past than resuscitations of the "reality" of the past itself. It is hardly an accident that the most radical of 20th century skeptics, Theodor Lessing, as expressed in his work *Die Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen*, first published in the aftermath of World War I, was attentive not only to early 19th century currents of historiographical skepticism inaugurated by Arthur Schopenhauer, or by Friedrich Nietzsche's rebuke of what he took to be the excess of the modern emphasis on historical reflection, but to the theories of critical philosophers of the early 20th century, such as Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert, whose work initially

contributed to elucidation of the paradox of historical understanding I have described.²

Radical skepticism concerning the historian's claim assumes that the quest to remember the historical past is no more than an expression of the investigator's *present* interests and current preconceptions. Nothing lies beyond the naive persuasiveness of these preconceptions, embedded in current logic and current sensibilities conveyed most immediately through language, which no investigation is able to surmount. For this reason, the historian's quest for meaning in the historical past ultimately, if unwittingly, projects constructions drawn from the immediacy of the current world and, in this perspective, has little relation to what is presumed to be the *past* itself. This consideration brings us back to our initial question "Why remember the historical past?", and permits us to pose it in more precise terms. On what grounds might we indeed suppose that the historical *past* may be attained by memory and, in other terms, that there might be an alternative to skeptical doubt which has hardly lost its persuasive force in our contemporary world?

1.

In the space of our brief study, we will limit our analysis to a principal area in which historical skepticism has come to expression: to the comparative analogies drawn between historical works and works of fiction. According to skeptical interpretations, historical works, in spite of their claim to resuscitate the past, are no more faithful to its reality than the fictional representations of literature.

Comparative analogies between historiography and fiction through which historiographical skepticism finds an outlet of expression are by no means of recent origin. In the early period of creation of the modern novel, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his epoch-making work on education, *Émile*, excluded from his pedagogical program works by modern historians, accusing them of having little relation to the reality of the past: "I see little difference between these novels and your histories", he wrote, "except that the novelist draws principally on his own imagination while the historian depends more upon that of someone else".³ In entirely different philosophical frameworks,

² See in this respect THEODOR LESSING's discussion of Windelband and Rickert in the 1927 edition of his work: *Die Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen oder die Geburt der Geschichte aus dem Mythos*. Leipzig: Reclam 1927, p. 7-16.

³ "Je vois peu de différence entre ces romans et vos histoires, si ce n'est que le romancier se livre davantage à sa propre imagination, et que l'historien s'asservit plus à celle

based on more elaborate epistemological justification, comparisons between historical works and works of fiction as a means of bolstering skeptical doubt concerning the historian's claim have found important expression in writings from Arthur Schopenhauer's chapter on history in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* and Nietzsche's proclamations in the second of the *Untimely Meditations* to Theodor Lessing's *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen*, to which we referred earlier.⁴

More recent years have witnessed the emergence of an analogous skepticism in the different framework of semiotics and literary criticism, beginning with the seminal writings of Roland Barthes in the 1960s and 1970s. Without engaging in the kind of rigorous analysis of the epistemological conditions of historical understanding characteristic of earlier philosophical investigation, Barthes' reflections began from Nietzsche's premise that facts are essentially linguistic constructs.⁵ On the basis of this theory of the constitutive role of language in the production of what is taken to be factual reality, Barthes developed his comparison between the historical work and the novel into a radical expression historiographical skepticism. In the opening paragraph of his celebrated essay concerning the relation of fiction and history, "The Discourse of History", Barthes raised the decisive question that has come to haunt historiography ever since:

d'autrui"; JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU, *Émile ou l'éducation*, Book IV (Paris: Garnier / Flammarion 1966), p. 310. Unless otherwise indicated all translations are my own.

⁴ Schopenhauer noted that if all historical writing lies far from the truth it claims to grasp, the most "interesting" form of historical writing is autobiography because it most closely resembles the novel; ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (Zürich: Diogenes 1977), II, 2, p. 519; Nietzsche's pronouncements on this theme in the second of the *Untimely Meditations* were particularly influential: "[...] nur wenn die Historie es erträgt, zum Kunstwerk umgebildet, also reines Kunstgebilde zu werden, kann sie vielleicht Instincte erhalten oder sogar wecken"; FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari. *Die Geburt der Tragödie. Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen I-III. 1872-1874.* vol. III, 1 (Berlin: De Gruyter 1972), p. 292; THEODOR LESSING's expression of thoroughgoing historical skepticism in his comparisons of history to the work of art may be found in: *Die Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen*, p. 104-110.

⁵ As Barthes writes: "On comprend dès lors que la notion de 'fait' historique ait souvent, ici et là, suscité une certaine méfiance. Nietzsche disait déjà : 'il n'y a pas de faits en soi. Toujours il faut commencer par introduire un sens pour qu'il puisse y avoir un fait'. A partir du moment où le langage intervient (et quand n'interviendrait-il pas?), le fait ne peut être défini que d'une manière tautologique"; ROLAND BARTHES, *Le discours de l'histoire*, in: *Le bruissement de la langue. Essais critiques IV* (Paris: Seuil 1984) p. 163; see also Barthes' comparison of Nietzsche's interpretation of facts with the historiographical practice of Michelet ([...] c'est Michelet qui a raison. Le voici, bien paradoxalement, aux côtés de Nietzsche") in his essay *Aujourd'hui, Michelet*, in: *Le bruissement de la langue. Essais critiques IV*, p. 243.

"Since the Greeks, the narration of past events is generally subject in our culture to the sanction of historical 'science', put forth with the imperious guarantee of being real, and justified by the principles of 'rational' demonstration. But is this narration truly different due to some specific feature or to some indubitable relation from imaginary narrative articulated in the epic drama, novel, or play?"⁶

Historical works, according to Barthes' argument, as narrative constructions which have little basis in the "reality" of the past, express their purpose in terms of the linguistic style or rhetorical mode they adopt. The quest to remember the historical past, like the creations of fiction, are ultimately expressions of the present context in which they are anchored. Motivated by concerns of the present, as so many expressions of its current ideology, historical constructions, as Roland Barthes and his school have argued, are essentially fictions, and it is on this basis that historical works are fundamentally comparable to works of literature. As Barthes has written in this vein:

"Historical discourse is essentially an ideological elaboration or, to be more precise, one which is *imaginary*, if it is true that the imaginary is the language by which the enunciator of discourse (a purely linguistic entity) 'fills in' the subject of the enunciation (a psychological or ideological entity)."⁷

Here we find the essential expression of historical skepticism in our times which has gained wide influence ever since. In response to the skeptical current that Barthes' writings incarnate, what therefore may lead us to assume that, beyond the fictional constructions couched in the discourse of the present – in its ideological elaboration – the quest to remember the historical past might find a counterpart in the depths of a past reality? Without delving into the technicalities of Barthes' linguistic investigations, or into a detailed examination of the influence of his presuppositions in subsequent historiographical theory, a succinct examination of Barthes' direct references to historiographical practice will suffice to bring into focus what I take to be a principal limit of contemporary historical skepticism more generally.

⁶ "[...] La narration des événements passés, soumise communément, dans notre culture, depuis les Grecs, à la sanction de la 'science' historique, placée sous la caution impérieuse du réel, justifiée par des principes d'exposition 'rationnelle', cette narration diffère-t-elle vraiment, par quelque trait spécifique, par une pertinence indubitable, de la narration imaginaire, telle qu'on peut la trouver dans l'épopée, le roman, le drame?"; BARTHES, *Le discours de l'histoire*, p. 163.

⁷ "Le discours historique est essentiellement élaboration idéologique, ou, pour être plus précis, *imaginaire*, s'il est vrai que l'imaginaire est le langage par lequel l'énonçant d'un discours (entité purement linguistique) 'remplit' le sujet de l'énonciation (entité psychologique ou idéologique)"; BARTHES, *Le discours de l'histoire*, p. 174.

It is consistent with Barthes' critical perspective that his focus on historiographical practice concerns the formative period of modern historiography which, as he notes, is also that of the modern novel. His interest in historiography took as exemplary the work of Jules Michelet, the historian whose talent in achieving dramatic effects showed a marked affinity with literary creation, above all with the novel. Michelet's account of the French Revolution in his multivolume *Histoire de France*, which was of particular interest to Barthes, dealt with events witnessed by generations directly prior to Michelet's own time, who were still close to contemporary idioms and symbols and stood in the proximity of the recollections of living persons. For dramatic effect, as the semiotician convincingly argues, Michelet introduced linguistic devices and fictive elements, which sustained the illusion that the narrative was anchored in historical "reality".⁸ To the grandchildren of the revolutionaries who were Michelet's contemporaries, the means of portrayal of recent events which had shaken European civilization to its foundations provided a particularly vivid way of rendering the pathos of the recent past, the dramatic discourse of which, as Barthes illustrated, well resembled that employed in the contemporary novel.

If the techniques of historical narrative and the reach of the historical imagination were limited to the creation of such dramatic simulations, the skepticism of Barthes and of his school would be supported by a strong argument. But is this all that the quest to retrieve the historical past might accomplish? Might it be, on the contrary, that beyond the devices used to create a plausible plot, a palpable — if only implicitly discernible — "reality" pulses beneath the historical narrative? Barthes and his followers find little difference in principle between fictive elements in historical writing and painstaking retrieval and comparison of available sources to which, in their interrelation as a group, the "reality" of a past context may be imputed. All historiography is ultimately based upon imaginary reconstruction tacitly expressing the current situation of the narrator.

The deeper implications of this position become visible, I believe, as soon as we examine the unspoken presupposition which governs the assumption that "fiction" and "historical representation" are similar in their essence. This presupposition concerns the sense that is conferred upon the *imaginary*. For Barthes, the imaginary, as fictive, is spontaneously contrasted with the "real". Historical imagination is essentially employed in the production of "fictive" representations but, in so limiting its grasp, Barthes betrays his dependence on an abstract preconception which he adopts without criti-

⁸ ROLAND BARTHES, L'effet du réel, in: *Le bruissement de la langue. Essais critiques* IV, p. 179–187

cal examination. This abstract preconception issues from a long tradition of reflection on the faculty of imagination according to which its objects are opposed to truths of reason as the guarantors of reality or "being".⁹ And here skeptical theory, according to my interpretation, in limiting historical imagination to the role of emplotment of "facts" in the fictive sphere of the narrative, fails to apprehend its fundamental significance for historical understanding. This excessively limited theory of imagination, indeed, risks blowing out the paradox of historical reflection into a hermetically sealed circle, for which all reflection circulates entirely within the sphere of the *present*. If, indeed, we have recourse only to imaginary narratives issuing from the ideological representations of a contemporary world, then the past exists only insofar as it has been covered over with the projections of the present. In this operation, representations of the historical past and literary fiction would equally express wholly contemporary concerns.

In more recent years Hayden White has developed Barthes' manner of relating historiography and fiction in the framework of a theory of the historical imagination which identifies it with a literary artifact. In his critical essays, White has provided an insightful discussion of Barthes' and of other contemporary theories of history and, even as he acknowledges that Barthes' conception of history relies on a "vast mass of highly problematical theories of language, discourse, consciousness, and ideology", he at the same time takes Barthes' Nietzschean formulation to which we alluded above – "The fact never has anything but a linguistic existence" ("Le fait n'a jamais qu'une existence linguistique") – as the motto for the volume of critical essays in which his discussion of Barthes is included.¹⁰ Where

⁹ The parallels to the Cartesian theory of the imagination in Barthes and structuralist and neo-structuralist theories is quite striking, but a more detailed examination of this question would overstep the framework of our current investigation. Suffice it to note in this context the counter-conception of the imagination presented by Goethe in a comment to Eckermann, where he underlines the notion of a "Phantasie für die Wahrheit des Realen", J. P. ECKERMANN, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag 1987), p. 154. See above all in this vein ERNST CASSIRER's interpretation of Goethe and this faculty of the imagination in: *An Essay on Man. An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1992), p. 204–206.

¹⁰ HAYDEN WHITE, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1987), p. ii, 35–37. On the question of the relation between language and history, Reinhart Koselleck has presented the following reflection in his article *Fiktion und geschichtliche Wirklichkeit*: "Gewiß sind geschichtliche Ereignisse ohne Sprechhandlungen nicht denkbar, geschichtliche Erfahrung und Erinnerung ohne Sprache nicht zu vermitteln. Aber immer gehen zahlreiche vor- und außersprachliche Faktoren in eine Geschichte ein, die zu artikulieren freilich selbst wiederum eine sprachliche Leistung darstellt. Deshalb rücken historische

White interprets this to mean that historical narratives are essentially “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found*” and the contexts of which “are themselves products of the fictive capability of the historians who have studied these contexts”, historiography is very nearly assimilated to literary fiction. Most important from our vantage point is the *present*-orientedness of the historian’s task according to White, which lies in the “refamiliarization” of vestiges of the past in the present, “by showing how their developments conformed to one or another of the story types that we conventionally invoke to make sense of our own life-histories”. Here literature and historiography share a common goal securely oriented in terms of the present. According to White’s revealing comment in the essay “History as a literary artifact”, we recognize the two genres of fiction and history both to be “the forms by which consciousness both constitutes and colonizes the world to inhabit it comfortably.”¹¹

This leads us to the decisive point: if all understanding, and the imagination which guides it, are so radically rooted in the present so as to be unable to discern, in focusing on the past, the ground of a past “reality”, what capacity might permit us to apprehend, in its distinction from a “real” past, the precise contours of the present *as present*? Skeptical interpretation, in limiting imagination to the emplotment of “facts” in the fictive sphere of the narrative, skirts by its broader capacity, which is not only to spin out tales, but to render historical experience possible. In accord with this capacity, imagination discerns concrete temporal nuances in distinguishing between the remembered past of contemporary experience and the historical past beyond all living memory. In this function it endows historical judgment with a capacity to surmount its absorption in the orientations of the present and of the immediate past to illuminate aspects of the historical past lying beyond its purview. It is this at once deliberative and intimative work of the imagination which we refer to as the “historical sense”. Such a capacity is, of course necessarily limited. It is always “standortsgebunden”, linked to the vantage point of the context in which it is rooted; but it is not for that

und fiktionale Texte nahe aneinander” (Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte. Die Rückkehr der Wahrheit, 1/3, Autumn, 2007, p. 52).

¹¹ HAYDEN WHITE, *The Historical Text as Literary Artifact*, in: *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 82, 87, 89, 99. For critical comments on Hayden White’s theories see especially the insightful analysis of LIONEL GOSSMAN, *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1990), p. 285–324 and also of JÖRN RÜSEN, *Lebendige Geschichte. Grundzüge einer Historik III. Formen und Funktionen des historischen Wissens* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht 1989), p. 22. Rösen suggests that in view of Hayden White’s tendency to assimilate historiography to a literary form, research “wird auf linguistische Prinzipien hin ‘hinter’-fragt, die zum Inventar jeder sprachlichen Weltbewältigung und Selbstdeutung des Menschen gehören.”

reason a source of merely imaginary creations. Imagination in its full sense permits us to distinguish between the timely plausibilities of contemporary existence and past possibilities which have lapsed into the oblivion of the unfashionable and the anachronistic. And the mark of the "reality" of the historical past lies primarily in its anachronistic coherence in relation to the present, lodged in the language, symbols, and gestures which, beyond the pale of living memory, it is the task of historical discernment, guided by the imagination, to reinterpret.¹² Against the mirror of that dimension of the past which is incommensurable with the present, the timely aspect of current persuasions and predominant fashions appears in the light of its contingency and ephemerality.

Barthes and his school have brought to light, often with perspicacity, the fictive elements which the historian's linguistic devices unwittingly translate into historical narrative. And there is truth in his pronouncement that the rigidity of the traditional distinction between works of fiction and those of history does not hold. But if this is the case, then it is not only due to fictive elements that enter into historical narrative, but also for the inverse reason: since not only the work of history but, in certain instances, the novel itself may manifest a capacity of the imagination to illuminate symbolic structures that delineate the "reality" of an historical context.¹³ In the concluding section of our study, let us take an example to illustrate

¹² In his essay *Historical Text as Literary Artifact* (p. 83–84), Hayden White refers to Collingwood's concept of the use of "constructive imagination" in the representation of historical narratives, capable of distinguishing the most plausible story among different possibilities. As he notes, the constructive imagination for Collingwood functions as an apriori faculty on the model of Kant's transcendental schematism. If White does not seem to fully accept this abstract and essentially a-historical model of the imagination, it is not clear to me what sense is to be given to the faculty of imagination according to White's model, unless it is that of producing essentially imaginary tales much in the sense of Roland Barthes. Concerning the illumination of symbolic structures implicit in the past I can only emphasize here ERNST CASSIRER's remarks at the conclusion of the third of his five studies in *Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften*, *Naturbegriffe und Kulturbegriffe* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1961, p. 86): "[...] die Kulturwissenschaft lehrt uns Symbole zu deuten, um den Gehalt, der in ihnen verschlossen liegt, zu enträtseln – um das Leben, aus dem sie ursprünglich hervorgegangen sind, wieder sichtbar zu machen."

¹³ In *The Historical Text as Literary Artifact*, Hayden White suggestively notes that the philosophy of language might help us "understand what is fictive in all putatively realistic representations of the world and what is realistic in all manifestly fictive ones" (p. 88). I concur with Paul Ricoeur's criticism on this point according to which White "does not really show us what is realistic in all fiction, [since] only the fictive side of the purportedly realistic representation of the world is stressed"; PAUL RICOEUR, *The Reality of the Historical Past* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press 1984), p. 51. Indeed, it is difficult to understand to what exactly "realistic" refers in White's statement – to "reality" or to "realism" as a literary genre.

this notion of a contextual reality which it is the primary quest of historical interpretation to uncover. For the purpose of commodity, I will refer to an historical novel – Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* – which was an exact contemporary to the emergence of modern forms of historiography in the early 19th century.

2.

First published in 1831, Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* provided an epoch-making contribution to the genesis of the historical novel in France. As an historical novel, this work takes a degree of liberty with the available sources which sets it apart from the typical historical works of the period, even those which come closest to reproducing the novelist's quest for dramatic effect, such as Jules Michelet's *Histoire de France*. In this work, Victor Hugo plays on an ambiguity which constitutes a principle mode of operation through which the historical novel attains its effect: the narrator relates events of the late 15th century with a directness and detail that could only be given by one who has experienced them, while at the same time claiming to present the historical account of distant events drawn from testimonies and documents. Hence, while the plot and most of the characters of the novel are entirely fictitious, they are at the same time portrayed in their interaction with other characters who are modeled on actual personages of the past, such as the late medieval dramatist Pierre Gringoire or Louis XI, King of France. While relating a wholly fictive tale, the narrator refers to himself in the novel as "just an historian" whose account draws upon the earlier records of "other" historians, such as the 15th century *Mémoires* of Philippe de Commines or the later *Antiquités de Paris* of Henri Sauval. And the ambiguous mix of fiction and history sustains the dramatic effect by creating for the readers the temporal illusion that they are uncovering a distant prefiguration of the contemporary Paris they inhabit, while in fact the narrative recasts what is most distant, particular and opaque in the past – beginning with the language, gestures, and other forms of symbolic interaction typical of the 15th century – in order to make it accessible to contemporary understanding and sensibility.

In its quest for dramatic emplotment the historical novel is thus anything but "historical", for it presents what is supposedly "past", while continually assimilating it to the present, portraying as historical what in fact is fiction, not only in terms of the characters it invents, but through the imaginary contextual structure of the period in which it is situated. This earlier age is brought up to date while made to look archaic through the selection of

isolated relics and piecemeal accounts – the passion play of Pierre Gringoire with which the novel opens, the illness of King Louis XI, the detailed topographical descriptions of medieval Paris – all of which simulate a past that, in its essential features, remains fictive. This only highlights the principal artifice introduced by the novel: the remembered past, which in a strict sense is available only to personal and group experience in a contemporaneous world, is extended backward “as if” to encompass in memory a context which, having long ago disappeared, lies beyond what any living memory might grasp.

Nonetheless, this is not all that the novel accomplishes, for its significance is hardly limited to its dramatic effect. The historical sense which Victor Hugo manifests in *Notre-Dame de Paris* lies in his ability to suspend the pursuit of dramatic narrative to reflect on the scope of the mutations which separate later centuries from this medieval heritage. Here the author centers reflective imagination on profound changes in the predominant sensibilities and mentalities that rendered gothic symbolism in all of its forms unattractive and even incomprehensible to the later tastes that replaced it. In a poignant description of the ways in which a given “present” relates to its past, in this case an epoch extending over a period of decades and of centuries up until the French Revolution, Victor Hugo evokes the loss of a capacity in later times to appreciate the significance and the beauty of the archaic symbolism and forms of expression of the medieval past. The fashions of each successive present destroyed what they could neither understand nor appreciate, and proved in this far more devastating than revolutions themselves. As Victor Hugo writes:

“Fashion has done more harm than revolutions. It has cut to the quick; it has attacked the very bone and framework of art. It has mangled, hacked, killed the edifice, in its form as well as in its meaning, in its logic as well as in its beauty. And then, it has remade, which, at least, neither time nor revolutions had pretended to do. In the name of ‘good taste’, fashion has clapped on the wounds of Gothic architecture the wretched gewgaws of the day: marble ribands, metal pompons, a veritable leprosy of ovoli, voutes, scallops, draperies, garlands, fringes, stone flames, brazen clouds, fleshy cupids, and chubby cherubim. All these embellishments began to eat away at art in the oratory of Catherine de Medicis, and made it expire two centuries later, tortured and convulsed, in the boudoir of Madame Du Barry.”¹⁴

¹⁴ “Les modes ont fait plus de mal que les révolutions. Elles ont tranché dans le vif, elles ont attaqué la charpente osseuse de l’art; elles ont coupé, taillé, désorganisé, tué l’édifice, dans la forme comme dans le symbole, dans sa logique comme dans sa beauté. Et puis, elles ont refait; prétention que n’avaient eue, du moins, ni le temps, ni les révolutions. Elles ont effrontément ajusté, de par le bon goût, sur les blessures de l’architecture gothique, leurs misérables colifichets d’un jour, leurs rubans de marbre, leurs pompons de métal: véritable lèpre d’ovales, de volutes, d’entournements, de draperies, de guirlandes, de franges, de flammes de pierre, de nuages de bronze, d’amours replets, de chérubins bouffis, qui commence

Such reconstructions of the past, which aim to grasp the ways in which its contextual sense lapses into an absence beyond the possibilities of appreciation or of comprehension of succeeding ages are, of course, not the chief province of fiction – even if they are vividly portrayed in such passages of *Notre-Dame de Paris* – but of works of history. This motif, indeed, furnished a source of intense reflection among contemporary historians culminating several decades later in Hippolyte Taine's description of the "esprit classique" in its victory over the medieval world in his work *Les origines de la France contemporaine*.

Here it might be argued that the historians as well as the novelists were evoking the distant past in the form of a new fashion which simply replaced the classicism of the previous age. And, in doing so, they asserted polemical or ideological intentions current in their period, above all the radical criticism of the world that had culminated in what they took to be the revolutionary cataclysm. Such representations of the past were patent expressions of ideological presuppositions. And yet, does the perception that the historical imagination of this period, as in all periods, was enmeshed in the orientations of the world in which it arose, permit us to conclude that all such forms of historical reflection were simple functions of that world, of its predominant rhetorical devices or of one or another of the ideological intentions lodged in its discourse?

What seems to me to resist any attempt at reduction to the vantage point of a given present is the temporal embodiment of a past in its incommensurability with later times, manifested through symbolic structures which are not immediately available to later reconstruction but require conceptual reflection and imaginative discernment to bring out their implicit sense. Literary creations can suggestively intimate the implicit singularity of the historical past; it is the work of historical investigation to explicate the symbolic texture that imparts to it its deeper contextual significance. The "reality" of the historical past lies in its transcendence of all representations of the present world, and of all ideological intentions which seek to mobilize it, continually enjoining us to rethink its meaning in each successive present. However biased and incomplete even the most impartial attempt to recover the vestiges of a past beyond living memory may be, its significance, far from limited to the status of a fictive invention of the present, reveals itself not only where it is capable of illuminating what has preceded

à dévorer la face de l'art dans l'oratoire de Catherine de Médicis, et le fait expirer, deux siècles après, tourmenté et grimaçant, dans le boudoir de la Dubarry"; VICTOR HUGO, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, p. 193; English translation by Walter J. Cobb, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. New York: New American Library 1965, p. 109–110.

current times, but where it enables us to place the fluctuating horizons of the present in perspective.

Summary

The past decades have witnessed the revival of radical skepticism in regard to our capacity to understand something of the "reality" of the historical past. This skepticism has found a most effective form of expression in comparative analogies that are drawn between historical works and works of fiction. Through examination of the variety of ways in which imagination is employed in historical narrative, this study presents critical analysis of the contemporary claims of historical skepticism. However biased and incomplete even the most impartial attempt to recover the vestiges of the past may be, this study advances the argument that its significance is hardly limited to the status of a fictive invention. Beyond a preoccupation with facts, historical interpretation is essentially concerned with the coherence of symbolic structures beyond the horizon of the present which not only serves to illuminate what preceded current times but, in so doing, enables us to identify what is timely in the present and to place its fluctuating horizons into perspective.

Zusammenfassung

Die letzten Jahrzehnte waren Zeugen der Wiederbelebung eines radikalen Skeptizismus in Hinblick auf unsere Möglichkeiten, etwas von der „Realität“ der Vergangenheit zu wissen. Diese Skepsis hat eine äußerst effektive Ausdrucksform in der Analogie zwischen historischen und fiktionalen Werken gefunden. Durch eine Untersuchung der verschiedenen Wege, wie in historischen Erzählungen das Vorstellungsvermögen geweckt wird, unternimmt diese Studie eine kritische Analyse der Ansprüche des historischen Skeptizismus. Wie voreingenommen und unvollständig der Versuch, die Überreste der Vergangenheit freizulegen, auch jeweils sein mag; seine Wichtigkeit kann kaum auf den Status einer Fiktion beschränkt bleiben. Neben der Beschäftigung mit Fakten ist historische Interpretation wesentlich mit der Kohärenz symbolischer Strukturen jenseits des Horizonts der Gegenwart beschäftigt; diese erhellt nicht nur, was der Gegenwart voraus liegt, sondern erlaubt uns zu erkennen, was in der Gegenwart nur zeitgebunden ist, und die veränderlichen Horizonte in eine Perspektive zu stellen.