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TRAUMA AND SUFFERING: A FORGOTTEN SOURCE OF WESTERN HISTORICAL THOUGHT

1. Methodological problems.

Comparison always requires some more or less neutral background, a *genus proximum*, in terms of which a description can be given of the items that one wishes to compare. This poses a difficult problem when we try to deal with the question that Professor Burke has put on the agenda: for what description of historical consciousness could one think of as actually possessing the required neutrality with regard to both Western and non-Western conceptions of the past? It is, arguably, precisely their 'incommensurability' that has awakened our interest in the relationship of Western and non-Western historical consciousness and that has invited the comparison.

Hence, our initial problem will first be how to start our investigation into this relationship and, more specifically, how to make sure that the right thing is compared to the right thing. To put it dramatically, it might well be that the closest analogue to the Western conception of the past is not to be found in non-Western historiography, as we might have thought as a matter of course, but, rather, for example, in the theological systems, conceptions of the self or in the works of art that we may find in non-Western cultures. Moreover, even Western historical consciousness itself may provide us with further examples of this kind of complication.

For instance, if one wishes to understand the evolution of Western historical consciousness from 1800 to 1830, one cannot leave literature, and more specifically, the historical novel, out of one's account. One would fail to nail down one of the strongest determinants of this evolution if one were to restrict one's gaze to historical writing itself and to ignore the tremendous influence of especially Scott's historical novels on the development of Western historical consciousness during this absolutely crucial period in the evolution of Western historical thought. In this period the history of historical consciousness temporarily abandoned historical writing itself and preferred to follow the paths of literature. Moreover, it could be argued that the nineteenth-century realist and naturalist novel was the result of a 'contemporization' of the historical novel¹: the accuracy in the repre-

¹ A movement into the opposite direction can be observed at the birth of the historical novel. For it has been argued that the historical novel resulted from a 'historicization' of the literary genre of the 'arcadia'. Ordinarily, in this genre, invented in sixteenth century Italy, a company of young lovers make a journey through the countryside while their conversation is not only devoted to love, but also to a learned exposition of the historical antecedents of the towns and villages that the company passes through. In this way elements of fiction (situated in the present) and history were combined; and it required only the 'historicization' of the (contemporary) element of fiction, i.e. the location of the arcadian love-story in the past as well, to produce the genre of the historical novel.

sentation of the life and times of the characters of the historical novel (an accuracy that was the strictest requirement of the genre), was now transposed to the present as well. After this transposition had been achieved, the realistic novelist could be required to present to his readers 'une copie exacte et minutieuse de la vie humaine' as Zola put it in the foreword to his *Thérèse Raquin*. And, to put the crown on all this, one may agree with Hayden White when he writes that historical writing, from the nineteenth century down to the present day, has carefully cultivated the style and the prose of the realistic novel, whereas in the novel itself, since the beginning of the twentieth century, many new and exciting experiments were made in the representation of human experience in language.

Thus, we may observe in the nineteenth century, from the perspective of the development of Western historical consciousness, a most complex intermingling of the genres of the novel and of historical writing. No exposition of the development of Western historical consciousness can claim validity if it does not properly account for these most complex interrelationships. And if such crossings can already be observed within one and the same culture, it is quite likely that they will similarly confound the far more ambitious and adventurous attempt to compare Western and non-Western historical consciousness.

A related and additional complication is that especially Western historical consciousness has undergone so many and such profound metamorphoses since the days of Hecataeus, that it may well be that in several phases of its evolution it has been closer to variants of non-Western historical consciousness than to several earlier or later variants of Western historical consciousness itself (I shall return to this later on). Needless to say, in so far as this would actually be the case, this would make nonsense of the whole question whether there are any categorical differences between Western and non-Western historical consciousness. All we would then have are different ways of experiencing the past and the attempt to find any systematic difference(s) between Western and non-Western conceptions of the past would be just as vain as the attempt to discover systematic differences between two slabs of marble coming from exactly the same location of the same quarry. Differences there may, and even will be, but they will not allow us to make any inferences going beyond the nature of these differences themselves. In both cases differences would be nothing but the signs of themselves.

2. *The 'psychoanalysis' of historical consciousness.*

However, even though Professor Burke does not insist on this and similar methodological problems, this will not, in itself, be sufficient to put in doubt his exposition of the differences between Western and non-Western conceptions of history. For we should realize that each such comparison always has to begin *somewhere*. There will always be an initial phase where we cannot yet be sure about what exactly we are comparing with what, and in terms of what we are making this comparison: only after some initial, and probably, or even inevitably, abortive attempts are made in this direction, will it gradually become clear what we have been talking about all along. Inevitably, cross-cultural comparisons like these can only get started in such a trial and error manner; and we have at this early phase no foolproof methodological rules at our disposal that we could blindly follow. Nevertheless, we ought to be aware of the problem and try, as much as possible, to avoid the projection or 'transference', in the Freudian sense of that word, of our own unconscious assumptions or 'historical neuroses' onto other cultures.

I have deliberately been using Freudian terminology just now: for the language of psychoanalysis might be helpful in making clear where I would differ with Professor Burke. Once again, I have no problem with his list of ten points of where Western and non-Western historical consciousness differ. Everything he has been saying along these lines seems to me entirely plausible, convincing, if not outright true. My problem is, rather, how can we know that this list is exhaustive

and, more specifically, not merely a random sample that could be enlarged at will, but one that really gravitates towards the center of our issue?

It is here that I should like to introduce one extra phase into the investigation. My suggestion is that we should not start with intuitions about the formal features of how the past is remembered by the West or in non-Western cultures, as is Professor Burke's strategy, but rather ask the quasi-transcendental question what made historical consciousness possible in either the West or on non-Western civilizations. Similarly - and this is why I took psychoanalysis as my model a moment ago - if we are well acquainted with two persons A and B, we may enumerate any number of differences in how each of them relates to his or her past, but it is only from a psychoanalytical point of view that we may guess the importance and the relevance of these differences. Only the 'depth' of a (quasi-)psychoanalytical assessment of their personalities may yield a hierarchization of these differences and give us an idea of their relationships and relative importance. And the explanation is that it is their psychology in which these observed differences have their ultimate ground, that has made these differences possible and therefore may enable us to really comprehend them. Hence, what I would like to suggest is that we should apply such a kind of 'cultural psychoanalysis' to the Western and the non-Western attitude towards the past and not be content merely to compile lists of agreements and differences in the absence of any reliable guide for how these might be connected, however useful and enlightening such lists may be at the start of an investigation like this one.

Now, I am well aware that trying to do something like this is a most ambitious enterprise that would require both a whole library for adequately working it out and a perhaps even larger library on which the effort would have to be based. So what I shall be saying about this only suggests the kinds of topics that one might possibly think of in this connection rather than what might be the right and most adequate thing to say about the issue.

3. Trauma as the origin of Western historical consciousness.

If, then, we look at Western and non-Western historical consciousness with the eyes of the 'cultural psychoanalyst' I introduced a moment ago, it must strike us that Western historical consciousness was strongly stimulated by and perhaps even originated in the traumatic experience of certain historical events. We may think here of what 1494 meant to Machiavelli, Guicciardini and to so many other sixteenth century Italian historians or of what 1789 and all that followed the Revolution meant to the French and the German historians of the beginning of the nineteenth. It may well be that the fact that the Anglo-Saxon world has had the fortune of never having to undergo such a traumatic experience may help us to explain why historical consciousness is so much an 'invention' of the European Continent. An additional argument for this thesis might be that what is undoubtedly the most interesting phase in the development of British historical thought, took place in the wake of 1649 - hence, of the event coming closest to such a traumatic experience in the course of British history.

Furthermore, the view that (the origins of) (Western) historical consciousness should be related to trauma can be clarified with the help of the following argument. It has often been argued that our sole contact with or experience of reality in which reality discloses to us its true nature, its radical strangeness and majestic indifference to us occurs in trauma - for in the non-traumatic experience of reality, reality has already been forced within the limits of the known, the familiar and the domesticated. Non-traumatically experienced reality is a reality that has already been processed by us in much the same way that the Kantian categories of the understanding 'process' the raw data of experience into what Kant defined as 'phenomenal' reality. Here reality has been appropriated by us, is familiar to us and has been robbed of all the threatening connotations of the traumatic. It is here that we may also observe a link with the Kantian sublime, since the sublime, as defined by Kant,

transcends the experience of reality as conditioned and processed by the categories of the understanding and thus presents us with reality in its quasi-noumenal quality and, therefore, with a reality that has still retained all of its radical alienness. The trauma is the sublime and *vice versa* and at the bottom of both is an experience of reality which shatters to pieces all our certainties, beliefs, categories and expectations.

Continuing this line of argument we might argue, next, that history as a reality of its own can only come into being as a result of the kind of traumatic collective experience I suggested a moment ago; and the implication would be that there is an indissoluble link between history and the miseries and the horrors of the past. Happiness, on the other hand, would, within this view, not significantly contribute to the substance of history. Reality 'as such', noumenal reality - and this would be true of historical reality as well - is essentially a *painful* reality - fundamentally an encounter with death, as this reality 'as such', in this century, most paradigmatically manifested itself in the traumatic sublime of the Holocaust. Of course, here we are in agreement with Hegel's well-known observation that the happy days of mankind are *eo ipso* the empty pages in the book of history.

Moreover, this line of argument would also elicit our agreement with of Huizinga's view that history is tragedy, and that the belief in progress and our more euphoric views of the past are merely our attempts to hide this unpleasant reality from view. Thus, what Kant in his *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (1798) referred to as the 'moral terrorist' and the 'eudaemonist' conceptions of the past, should not be placed next to each other at an equal level: (psycho-)logically the former really precedes the latter. Once again, the past is essentially and primarily a painful past; and histories rejoicing in, for example, the triumphs of monarchs, soldiers and heroes will never be able to give us that essence. The great deeds of a nation, of a social class or a civilization give it much less of a historically defined coherence and identity than trauma and suffering, at least if certain circumstances are satisfied, can achieve; this is probably an explanation why the victims of history may - once again, under certain and surely not all circumstances - discover in history a far more powerful ally than their victors will ever be able to do. Shared traumatic pain provides the collectivity with a common basis in a far deeper layer of reality than happiness and joy could ever be capable of. Here Thierry and the Marxists were surely right, with regard to the bourgeoisie and the industrial proletariat respectively, when they showed that their past sufferings had been the condition of the so prominent role they would later play in the history of mankind.

Now, I believe that this will enable us to discern a fundamental difference between Western and non-Western historical consciousness. Though non-Western history has had more than its own share of tragedy, of war, murder and devastation; though 1494 and 1789 may even be considered mere ripples on the surface of history if compared to the abject fate of the Aztecs, the Indians or of the unspeakable horrors that Mongol rule inflicted on Central Asia, it seems that only Western man was capable of a traumatic experience of history. Strangely enough there seems to be no proportion between the amount of suffering that a civilization has had to go through and its propensity to a traumatic experience of these horrors. Apparently experience also has its varieties - as interpretation does. Relatively minor collective disasters may, under certain circumstances, prove to be a stronger stimulus of historical consciousness than the worst that humanity has had to undergo in the course of its history.

I would even be prepared to defend the view that this insight may give us a handle on where Western civilization since the Renaissance differs essentially from the Medieval West preceding it (and from the relationship to the past that we may find in non-Western cultures). For what were 1494 and 1789 if compared to the disintegration of the Roman Empire and the confusions that followed it, or to the Black Death of 1348 that killed one third of the European population and instilled an intense feeling of fear, despair and desolation in the mind of the West for almost two centuries - as has so brilliantly been shown by Delumeau in his *La peur en Occident?* Once again,

arguably, mere ripples on history's surface. Yet not even these frightful events of the early and the late Middle Ages, nor the tragedies and horrors of the Hundred Years' War², effected anything even remotely resembling the coherence and the intensity of Guicciardini's experience of the past in the minds of the Gregory of Tours and the Froissarts, who so extensively and exhaustively (and with such curious dispassion) described these horrors.

One may wonder how to explain that tragedy, horror and human suffering at an unprecedented scale so often tended to fade quietly away in the mists of time, whereas in the West relatively minor historical disasters could suddenly be experienced as the kind of trauma from which Western historical consciousness originated. Why and how did this unique capacity for collective trauma come into being in the West? Asking this question is to invite once again a number of unpleasant methodological problems. For, surely, at this highly abstract level we will typically be unable to distinguish *explanantia* from *explananda*, and it may even be that what we might mention as the cause of this sudden Western susceptibility to historical trauma is the consequence of this susceptibility rather than its cause.

4. *The traumatic past is an abstract past.*

But allowing for this and similar uncertainties, I would nevertheless venture the following explanation. As will be clear from the above, this susceptibility to collective trauma should not be explained by considering the quantity of 'collective pain' that was inflicted on a civilization, nor even by the intensity of this pain, for even outright unendurable collective pain only rarely results in the creation of historical consciousness. I believe that the explanation is, rather, that in the West a shift may be observed from collective pain to an *awareness* of this pain and that this is how this peculiar Western capacity for suffering collective trauma originated. I hasten to add the following in order to avoid misunderstanding. When thus emphasizing the significance of the awareness of pain, I do certainly not intend to attack the commonsensical and unexceptionable view that one cannot be in pain without an awareness of this pain. Certainly, one cannot be in pain without knowing that one is in pain; certainly, I do not want to argue that the Aztecs, or, for that matter, fifteenth century Europeans, were singularly unaware of their sufferings and stolidly underwent their historical fate in the way that a rock may tumble down from a mountain.

² We may well recall here the lines that Shakespeare put into the mouth of La Pucelle of Orleans when she addressed Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy:

'Look on thy country, look on fertile France,
And see the cities and the towns defac'd
By wasting ruin of the cruel foe!
As looks the mother on her lovely babe
When death doth close his tender dying eyes,
See, see the pining malady of France;
Behold the wounds, the most unnatural wounds
Which thou thyself hast given her woeful breast!'

See *First Part of King Henry VI*, scene III.

The contrast between Philip the Good and Guicciardini - to whom I shall turn in a moment - is most revealing here. Philips' alliance with England had the same disastrous consequences for France - his own country, that is - as Guicciardini's advice to Clement VII would have for Italy a century later. Yet, while Guicciardini was driven to a paroxysm of desperation by his awareness of what he had done to his country in spite of all his most praiseworthy intentions, Philip could not have cared less. It is this difference that sums up the differences between the Medieval and the Renaissance relationship to the past.

Actually, what I wish to say is rather the reverse. That is, what is typical of trauma is precisely an *incapacity* to suffer or to assimilate the traumatic experience into one's life-history. What comes into being with trauma is not so much an openness to suffering, but a certain *numbness*; a certain insensitivity as if the receptacles for suffering have become inadequate to the true nature and the proportions of suffering. It is in this way that a dissociation has come into existence between suffering itself and the *awareness* of this suffering; although the two *always* and inevitably go together, it is here as if, when being in pain, I experience my pain as being a mere, though absolutely reliable *sign* that someone (i.e. myself) is in pain, while not actually feeling the pain itself. While being in pain myself I now feel tempted, so to speak, to look at myself from a point of view that no longer, or at least no longer automatically, coincides with myself as the person who *is* in pain.

Similarly, trauma effects a *dissociation* of a traumatically experienced reality and the subject of the traumatic experience. When Charcot and Janet were, in the 1880's, the first to seriously investigate the phenomenon of traumatic shock, especially Janet strongly insisted on the *dissociation* that trauma seemed to effect in one and the same person between a normal self with normal memories and a traumatically disturbed self to which this normal self and these normal memories are no longer accessible. Much of this original conception of trauma is still retained in what is presently known as the so-called 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and which is clinically defined as follows: 'In Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (...) the overwhelming events of the past repeatedly possess, in intrusive images and thoughts, the one who has lived through them. (...) Yet what is particularly striking in this singular experience is that its insistent reenactments of the past do not simply serve as testimony to an event, but may also, paradoxically enough, bear witness to a past that was never fully experienced as it occurred. Trauma, that is, does not simply serve as record of the past but it precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned'³. The paradox of trauma thus is that it gives us a past that is neither forgotten nor remembered; it gives us a past continuing to exist in us as a reality that we remember precisely because we *cannot* remember it and because we have *no* actual access to it. Trauma occurs because of the subject's incapacity to absorb the traumatic experience within the whole of his life-story and that makes him traumatically aware of a reality hiding itself from him as soon as it reveals itself and makes itself felt to him. Or, to rephrase all this in the terms that were proposed by Janet: whereas 'normal' history is the result of *association*, of a narrative integration or concatenation of experiences so that they can be 'appropriated' or 'owned' by us, 'traumatic' history is the result of a process of *dissociation*, of presenting our faculty of historical and narrative association with a challenge that it is, as yet, unable to meet.

I would suggest that something closely resembling the foregoing description of trauma took place when Western historical consciousness came into being somewhere in the 16th and the 17th centuries. History became something that was remembered precisely because of this paradox of a remembering that one cannot remember, because of an awareness that memories did not enable us one 'appropriate' or to properly 'own' the objects of memory. Collective suffering now took on the features of a reality that continuously is most painfully present to us but that we are, at the same time, unable to assimilate in ourselves: suffering now became strangely and unnaturally abstract, something to be explained (historically), but that is not experienced primarily, or, at least, not completely exhausted in or by the *experience* of suffering itself. It became an occasion for thought, much in the same way that both Hegel and Freud argued that what distinguishes human beings from animals is that thought places itself between desire and the satisfaction of desire in the case of human beings whereas animals always look for an immediate satisfaction of their desires. Collective suffering now became a part of culture, something that could be expressed in the idiom of that culture, something that one could talk and write about. And in this 'hollow' between suffering and

³ C. Caruth, Introduction, *American Imago* 48 (1991); 417.

the language used for speaking about it a new kind of discourse gradually and gropingly came into being - i.e. historical writing - having as its goal to relate this talking and writing about suffering to suffering itself. Historical writing, discourse and historical consciousness *mediate* between trauma and suffering themselves on the one hand and the objectification of trauma and suffering on the other that is so much characteristic of Western civilization. The historian's language originates in the 'logical space' between traumatic experience and a language that still had a primordial immediacy and directness in its relationship to the world - and then pushes this language aside. Historical language pulls language and reality apart and thus destroys the directness in the relationship of language to reality that the former still possessed in the pre-historicist phase of civilization - that is, in the Middle Ages or in non-Western civilizations - while at the same time it now attempts to bridge again the gap it had thus inadvertently opened up itself.

This may also explain why Western historical consciousness is so intimately and so closely related to an awareness of the unintended consequences of intentional human action. We may intend to do one thing but, while trying to realize our purposes, actually achieve quite another thing. Thus Guicciardini sincerely believed that he had given the best possible advice to Clement VII but, at the same time, he was painfully well aware that with his advice he had, in fact, achieved the Sack of Rome and therewith the destruction of the beauties and the glories of the Eternal City. It was his realization that, unwittingly, he had himself been no less disastrous to the history of the country that he loved more than himself, than Ludovico il Moro had been when he invited Charles VIII to invade Italy in 1494, that made him aware of the unintended consequences of our actions with an almost existentialist intensity. This is what *history* essentially meant to him and would mean to later, post-medieval Western civilization. For it is, when wondering about the torment of this frightful discrepancy between our intentions and actions on the one hand and their actual consequences on the other, that we are forced to step back from or outside ourselves in order to be able to observe this discrepancy and, by doing so, to start thinking historically. The pain we feel under such circumstances is, peculiarly enough, a pain that alienates us from the painful event itself - as is typically the case in trauma as discussed above. And, lastly, it is a pain that, not only Guicciardini, but almost all of the sixteenth century Florentine historians seemed to cultivate with an almost sado-masochistic pleasure: for one cannot read their histories without being struck by their strange propensity to attribute to their own country, to Florence, a far greater responsibility for Italy's disasters than is warranted by actual historical fact. Perhaps self-accusation is also an art that a civilization only learns to practice properly in the course of time (and from that perspective it would not be surprising that the discovery of the art of self-accusation began with such a strong overdose of it).

Obviously, one might now go back one step further and ask what the explanation is for Guicciardini's unprecedented susceptibility to the unintended consequences of his actions. Why did his awareness of what he had done to his country fill his mind with an unbearable and traumatic pain, whereas, for example, Philip the Good of Burgundy looked with complete equanimity at the destruction wrought on France because of his self-serving alliance with England? Once again, when considering this question it will be hard to distinguish causes from their effects and to establish exactly what preceded what. But now that we have already entered onto the path of reckless speculation, I may be forgiven for venturing the following view.

It might well be that for Philip the Good socio-political reality would remain fundamentally the God-willed order that it had always been, regardless of the nature of his actions. That is to say, he considered his actions to touch merely upon the surface of socio-political reality and to be incapable of stirring its depth - supposing that the distinction between its surface and depth would have made any sense to him at all. He did not yet have the notion of political action in the real, modern sense of that word, that is, of the kind of public action that truly 'makes a difference' to what

the world is, or will be like. Certainly, that does not in the least imply that he would be incapable of feeling any responsibility for what he did or did not do; but the crucial datum is here that this responsibility regarded only his *own* person and how that person might be seen by the eyes of God. And this was different for Guicciardini; for the responsibility that Guicciardini felt was a responsibility to *the world* (or to Italy) rather than to *God*.

But perhaps this is an unilluminating way of putting it. It might be more enlightening to rephrase the contrast into the terms of Ruth Benedict's well-known opposition between 'shame cultures' and 'guilt cultures'. Following this lead one might say that in a certain sense Philip the Good could only feel *ashamed* of himself because and when he had, somehow, messed up his own life; but even if he had done so in his own eyes, the consequences of his actions could, within his conception of the world, never have any real impact on the order that had been willed by God. He could only feel responsible towards himself and his own salvation. Precisely because he was so much part of reality, so completely submerged in it, so much surrounded by reality on all sides, precisely because of the complete osmosis between himself and reality, a responsibility towards himself was the maximum he could possibly be expected to feel. To feel *guilty*, to feel responsible towards the world would have been to him a presumptuous and proposterous blasphemy. That would have been as if an ant had thought of itself as having been the cause of the death of a whole civilization. And in that sense he could not properly be said to be 'guilty' of his actions: for shame is a private feeling, whereas guilt always has to do with a debt that we owe the world. So what happened, somewhere between Philip the Good and Guicciardini, is that the individual withdrew from the world (in which Philip the Good still felt immersed to such an extent that he could never detach his own actions from it), and now became enthralled by the idea that, from this vantage-point outside reality, we can do things to reality that may make 'a difference to it', or may even fundamentally alter it. And the paradox is, therefore, that it was a *withdrawal* and not a further *immersion* in it which made Western man exchange shame for guilt and transformed a fixation on the responsibility for one's own salvation into that for the (historical) world.

I would not have hazarded this risky contention if it did not find some additional support in what happened in our relationship to natural reality and in the origins that the sciences have in the same period that witnessed, in the writings of Guicciardini and his Italian contemporaries, the birth of modern historical consciousness. For from this vantage-point we cannot fail to be struck by what the historical and the scientific revolution have in common. As we all know, the scientific revolution was only possible thanks to the creation of the scientific, transcendental ego whose philosophical properties have been so eagerly investigated by Descartes, Kant and so many others down to the present day. And, as we all know, this transcendental ego, was, just like historical consciousness, the product and result of a movement of *anachoresis*⁴, of a withdrawal of the self from the world itself within an inner cognitive sanctuary which decides about the reliability of the data of experience. Quite revealing here is, the *bene vixit, bene qui latuit* (he has lived well who knew how to hide himself well) that Descartes took as his device: scientific truth will never be given to man as long as he fully participates in all the complexities of daily life. Science requires distance, not immersion and participation. The mastery of both the historical and the physical world is, therefore, the miracle wrought by a *reculer pour mieux sauter*: only after having left (historical and physical reality) itself and after having situated itself at an Archimedian vantage-point outside reality itself - only after having adopted this paradoxical strategy, could the Western mind gain an ascendancy over historical and natural reality that it had never possessed before. And it is only in this way that what we have come to see as 'history' and 'science' in the West became possible.

⁴ I am deliberately using this theological term in order to suggest what might be considered to have been the religious origins of modern science and historical writing.

But a price had to be paid for this. For the same numbness that we observed a moment ago when discussing historical consciousness, the same falling apart of the directness and immediacy of (historical) experience that gave us (Western) historical consciousness also gave us modern science but at the expense of the experience of nature. Instead of the experience of nature we now have our scientific knowledge of how we can make nature subservient to our aims and purposes - and it is, perhaps, only in the arts that a faint reminiscence of the experience of nature has been retained. We can experience nature only by and through the artifacts that artists have of it in order to *represent* it.

Moreover, this is also why we may well have our doubts about the tradition ordinarily associated with Vico suggesting an invincible epistemological barrier between historical writing on the one hand and (Cartesian) science on the other. Certainly, there may be such a barrier between the direct and immediate experience of the past such as we find it in non-Western civilizations or in Western historical writing before the days of Guicciardini, but the historical writing of Vico's and of our own days is, like modern science, the result of the *anachoresis*, or modernist division of the self. Vico could only regret the directness in the relationship between Homer's heroes and their world because of his awareness that this directness had sadly been lost in his own days of the 'barbarism of reflection'.

5. *Final remarks.*

I want to add one last remark. We must not be mistaken about the nature of this change. It is, in many ways, not at all a big change really: it is not something like a war, a revolution, the birth of a new religion or the discovery of a new and effective weapon. In fact, historical reality as such is not in the least affected by it, it is not even a change in historical reality itself. Rather, it is a change in how Western man decided to *look* at historical reality, it is a change in perspective, while everything that it is a perspective on remained the way that it had always been. Yet, these small and immaterial changes may become irreversible and determine the future fate of humanity. They are like a mutation: somewhere in the union of the genes of one specific animal of a specific genus something may go different on a microscopic scale and, yet, this microscopic event may result in a new phase in the history of evolution and in a new regime between the victims and the victors in this world. And so it has been with the rise of Western historical consciousness. In the minds of authors like Machiavelli and Guicciardini the fate of Italy after 1494 was experienced as an irretrievable, irreparable and traumatic loss that caused in them an unendurable pain, the deepest regret, feelings of the profoundest guilt and of the cruellest self-reproach. Nevertheless, it was this historically microscopic event, this 'mutation' that would change the face of Western civilization and, by the logic proper to all mutations, several centuries later, of non-Western civilizations as well.

Of course all that I have been saying here is highly speculative: it is just one more way of selecting and arranging a number of well-known facts about the gradual development of historical writing and of historical consciousness since the dawn of mankind. Many other selections and arrangements of these same facts are just as legitimate, or probably even more so. Hence, these musings about the trauma from which the Western conception of the past originated are emphatically not an attempt to state the final truth about the origins of Western historical consciousness or about how that might differ from non-Western historical consciousness.

I do believe, nevertheless, that we should go down to this very fundamental level if we wish to address the issue of the relationship between Western and non-Western conceptions of the past. It is at this level that truth should no longer be our primary goal, simply because the set of shared presuppositions that truth always requires are absent here. But if truth is not attainable here, this should not deter us from asking questions like these. For it may well be that the truly important thing about such questions is that we should discuss them, and go on discussing them, even if we

were to know that we will never know the final truth about the issue at stake. As Lessing already argued more than two hundred years ago in his *Nathan der Weise*, it sometimes is more important simply to possess a certain discourse rather than the truths that might be expressed within that discourse - and perhaps this is what I have been talking about all along. Perhaps this is a truth not only about the history of historical writing and about historical consciousness, but about historical writing itself as well. We should always indefatigably and passionately search for historical truth, but never forget, at the same time, that we lose rather than gain something when we actually achieve it.

F.R. Ankersmit

Groningen University