



GABRIELLE M. SPIEGEL

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*Presidential Address*  
The Task of the Historian

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TRADITIONALLY, FOR HISTORIANS, the ethical core of our professional commitment has been a belief that our arduous, often tedious labor yields some authentic knowledge of the dead “other,” a knowledge admittedly shaped by the historian’s own perceptions and biases, but nonetheless retaining a degree of autonomy, in the sense that it cannot be made entirely to bend to the historian’s will. This founding belief in the irreducible otherness of the past conferred on history its proper function, which was to recover that past in as close an approximation of “how it actually was” as possible. In the interest of preserving the autonomy of the past, the historian practiced modesty as a supreme ethical virtue, discreetly holding in abeyance his or her own beliefs, prejudices, and presuppositions.

Yet this traditional understanding of the nature, epistemological grounding, truth-value, and goals of historical research faced a significant challenge beginning in the late 1960s and the 1970s with the emergence of what came to be known as the “linguistic turn,” the belief that language is the constitutive agent of human consciousness and the social production of meaning, and that our apprehension of the world, both past and present, arrives only through the lens of language’s pre-coded perceptions. Moreover, language, once understood as a relatively neutral medium of communication, sufficiently transparent to convey a reasonably accurate sense of reality, itself had been reconceptualized with the emergence of structural linguistics or semiotics, a movement that began with the publication in 1916 of Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics*. Far from reflecting the social world of which it is a part, language, Saussure argued, precedes the world and makes it intelligible according to its own rules of signification. Since for Saussure such rules are inherently arbitrary, in the sense of being social conventions implicitly understood in different ways by differing linguistic communities, the idea of an objective universe existing independently of speech and universally comprehensible despite one’s membership in any particular language system is an illusion.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye in

Such was the “semiotic challenge” posed to the practice of historiography by the rise of structural linguistics and continuing with the successive emergence of structuralism, semiotics, and poststructuralism, including the elaboration of deconstruction.<sup>2</sup> The principal impact of these cognate developments was felt most intensely in the period after World War II; after 1965 they assumed the name “linguistic turn,” a term disseminated by the pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty in his essay “Metaphysical Difficulties of Linguistic Philosophy” and generalized to various disciplines throughout the course of the seventies and after.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not the linguistic turn constituted the kind of epistemological crisis for historiography that several of my predecessors in this office believed, it is clear that it represented a massive change in our understanding of the nature of historical reality, the methods of research we deployed in seeking to recover the past, and the nature of the truth claims that could be asserted about the product of our labors. Never entirely accepted in the full range of its claims, it nonetheless had a significant impact on how historians construed their basic tasks and the procedures and language in which they were conducted.

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collaboration with Albert Riedlinger, trans. with an introduction and notes by Wade Baskin (New York, 1966), 67ff. Positions like these made it easy for critics such as Perez Zagorin to argue that postmodernism “is a philosophy of linguistic idealism . . . [which] denies both the ability of language or discourse to refer to an independent world of facts and things and the determinacy or decidability of textual meanings. By the same token it also dismisses the possibility of objective knowledge and truth as goals of inquiry.” In Zagorin’s view, this represents a fundamental misreading of Saussure, who never abandoned the notion of the referential relation of signs to things, even if signs as such were inherently “arbitrary.” See Zagorin, “History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now,” *History and Theory* 38 (1999): 7. For a response to Zagorin, on the grounds that postmodernism is not anti-realist but rather anti-representationalist, see Keith Jenkins, “A Postmodern Reply to Perez Zagorin,” *History and Theory* 39 (2000): 182ff. Although Zagorin is correct that Saussure believed in the constative or referential function of signs within given speech communities, he is surely wrong in his charge of linguistic idealism, since, as Jason A. Frank has pointed out, “the emphasis in [linguistic turn] historiography has been on written language, tropes, socially structured speech patterns and the practices of literary production and consumption, rather than on the self-sufficiency of ‘ideas’ existing free of material embodiment.” Frank, “History and the Necessary Limits of Theory” (unpublished Field Paper in Historiography and the Problematics of Historical Knowledge, Johns Hopkins University), 8.

<sup>2</sup> On these developments, see my article “History, Historicism and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 65 (1990): 59–86, reprinted in Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore, 1997), 3–28.

<sup>3</sup> The essay was published in Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago, 1967). Rorty, of course, was working within the tradition of analytic philosophy, a tradition that to a certain extent ran parallel to that arising from Saussurean linguistics, and one that was also highly influential in the work of historians such as John Pocock and Quentin Skinner and the “school” of political thought that their work fostered. As an aside, it might be worth pointing out that even Rorty, whose 1965 article is generally credited with having introduced the notion of a fundamental “linguistic turn” in philosophy and related disciplines, retreated from his original position on its enduring significance. In a retrospective essay, “Twenty-Five Years Later,” Rorty confessed that the importance he attributed to the phenomenon of the “linguistic turn” seemed to him already in 1975—the date of an initial retrospective essay (“Ten Years Later”)—“to have been little more than a tempest in an academic teapot,” and now appears “positively antique.” Indeed, he asserts, his earlier assumption that “the problems of philosophy are problems of language strikes me as confused,” primarily, he explains, because he “is no longer inclined to think there is such as thing as ‘language’ in any sense which makes it possible to speak of ‘problems of language.’” Rorty, “Twenty-Five Years Later,” in Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method—With Two Retrospective Essays* (Chicago, 1992), 371. For Rorty, in a statement that appears to me to be deeply symptomatic of a much broader response at present to the “linguistic turn,” what now counts as philosophically interesting and legitimate is “problems connected to what [Ian] Hacking calls ‘interfacing.’ These are problems about ‘the relation of mind and reality, or language and reality, viewed as the relation between a medium of representation and what is purportedly represented.’” *Ibid.*, 371.

Anyone who has lived through the last four decades of change in historiographical praxis can appreciate the need to investigate how such a profound transformation in the nature and understanding of historical work, both in practice and in theory, could have taken place. The reason for doing so now is that we all sense that this profound change has run its course. As Michael Roth recently noted, “for the last decade or so, recognition has been spreading that the linguistic turn that had motivated much advanced work in the humanities is over. The massive tide of language that connected analytic philosophy with pragmatism, anthropology with social history, philosophy of science with deconstruction, has receded; we are now able to look across the sand to see what might be worth salvaging before the next waves of theory and research begin to pound the shore.”<sup>4</sup> But to determine what might be worth saving, we need some explanation of how and why this sea change in history occurred; what motivated it; what governed the rhythms of its acceptance, dissemination, and decline; and what its implications are for our continuing practice, even as we sense that the hold of poststructuralism and postmodernism on current historiography is diminishing.<sup>5</sup> What, if any, shared epistemologies, methodologies, and questions might exist between the fundamental postulates of the linguistic turn and the new foci of historical work on the immediate horizon? An appreciation of the determining constituents of this rather extreme case of historiographical change may offer some insights into what remains valuable as we move forward into a new era of historical concerns, one that is already, and increasingly will be, adapted to the new global environment in which we currently live.

Before broaching the question of what “caused,” in some sense still to be discovered, the rise of linguistic turn historiography, we would do well to consider more generally what historical practice consists of, for any change in practice, even one as startling and deep-rooted as the linguistic turn, necessarily occurs initially within the confines of normal historiographical practice, and thus must be seen against the background of its routines.

One of the most significant characteristics of the contemporary practice of history, important for the points I wish eventually to make, derives from the central paradox of historical writing as analyzed by Michel de Certeau. In de Certeau’s opinion, modern Western history essentially begins with a decisive differentiation between the present and the past. Like modern medicine, whose birth was contemporaneous with that of modern historiography, the practice of history becomes possible only when a dead corpse is opened to investigation, made legible such that it can be translated into that which can be written within a space of language.<sup>6</sup> His-

<sup>4</sup> Michael Roth, “Ebb Tide,” review of Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience, History and Theory* 46 (2007): 66.

<sup>5</sup> I should acknowledge that the extent to which the profession as a whole adopted the “linguistic turn” is probably exaggerated here, although I think the prevalence of studies of “discourse,” the spread of feminist concepts of gender, and the rise of postcolonial theory and history bear witness to the fact that its impact was far wider than might be thought merely from examining the work of those directly engaged with debating “theory” or doing intellectual history. However, it remains true that the actual number of historians actively engaged with these questions was probably relatively small in comparison to the field as a whole. Nonetheless, it did represent a significant challenge to historians’ traditional ways of conceiving history and had a discernible impact on the nature of the truth claims and epistemological objectivity that historians felt comfortable in asserting.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the Greek *autopsia* (“to see for oneself”), as it appears in Herodotus and other ancient historians, originally referred to facts narrated by the historian to which he was himself an

torians must draw a line between what is dead (past) and what is not, and therefore they posit death as a total social fact, in contrast to tradition, which figures a lived body of traditional knowledge, passed down in gestures, habits, unspoken but nonetheless real memories borne by living societies. For de Certeau, discourse about the past has as the very condition of its possibility the status of being discourse about the dead, a discourse with which historians fill the void between past and present created by history's founding gesture of rupture.<sup>7</sup> In that sense, the basic principle of modern historiography is the disappearance of the past from the present, its movement from visibility to invisibility. The historian's task becomes, therefore, what Hugo von Hofmannsthal defined as "reading what was never written."<sup>8</sup> It is in this moment that the past is saved, "not in being returned to what once existed, but instead, precisely in being transformed into something that never was, in being 'read as what was never written.'"<sup>9</sup> From that perspective, the principal relation of the historian to the past is an engagement with absence.

The fact that historians must construct the objects of their investigation does not mean, however, that they are necessarily free of the past or that the findings so generated are merely fictive postulates. Historians escape neither the survival of former structures nor the weight of an endlessly present past—an "inertia" that traditionalists were wont to call "continuity." But it does mean that in contemporary historiography, the sign of history has become less the real than the intelligible, an intelligibility achieved through the production of historiographical discourse according to narrativist principles, hence always flirting with the "fictive" that is intrinsic to the operation of narrative. In this process, the historical "referent" (or what used to be called the "real," the "true," the "fact") is not so much obliterated as displaced. No longer a "given" of the past that offers itself to the historian's gaze, the referent is something constantly re-created in the recurring movement between past and present, hence ever-changing as that relationship itself is modified *in* the present.

If we acknowledge that history is the product of contemporary mental representations of the absent past that bear within them strong ideological and/or political imprints—and it seems unlikely that any historian would today disagree with this, whether framed in terms of discourse, social location, or some other form of the historian's fashioning—then it seems logical to include within the determinants of historical practice the impress of individual psychological forces in the coding and decoding of those socially generated norms and discourses. To be sure, there were forces within the intellectual traditions of European philosophy and history that shaped the course of these developments as well, together with powerful social changes at work, but my interest here is in the psychological roots of the linguistic turn, however realized through additional channels of thought.<sup>10</sup>

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eyewitness, indicating an etymological link between the investigation of the past and postmortem examination.

<sup>7</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York, 1988), 5.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase of Hofmannsthal is cited in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1972–1989), 1: pt. 3, 1238. I am indebted to Daniel Heller-Roazen for this reference.

<sup>9</sup> See the discussion of this in Daniel Heller-Roazen, "Introduction," in Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif., 1999), 1.

<sup>10</sup> In that sense, one cannot legitimately account for Derrida's deconstructive turn without taking into



In attempting to discover the possible psychic roots of the linguistic turn that so challenged our understanding of history, I would like to begin with what I have elsewhere argued are the psychic roots of poststructuralism, and of Derridean deconstruction in particular, which I consider to have been the basic articulation of poststructuralism's—and hence the linguistic turn's—most important principles.<sup>11</sup> Although there certainly were strands of deconstruction that differed from Derrida's, and, more generally, principles of postmodernism that addressed quite different concerns, for the purposes of this argument I will take Derridean deconstruction as the key expression of the impulses at work in generating the linguistic turn.<sup>12</sup>

We may legitimately take, I believe, the hallmark of deconstruction to have been a new and deeply counterintuitive understanding of the relationship between language and reality—counterintuitive in the sense that deconstruction's framing of that relationship interposes so many layers of mediation that what we experience as “reality” is seen to be a socially (that is, linguistically) constituted artifact or “effect” of the particular language systems we inhabit, thereby undermining materialist theories of experience and the ideas of causality and agency inherent in them. Moreover, deconstruction proposes an inherent instability at the core of language that places the determination of meaning ultimately beyond our reach, for every text, in the broad sense that deconstruction understands that term, founders ultimately on its own indeterminacy, its aporia, the “impasse beyond all possible transaction,” as Derrida defines it, “which is connected with the multiplicity of meanings embedded within the uniqueness of textual inscription.”<sup>13</sup> The psychic destabilization produced by such a problematizing of the relationship between *res* and *verba* (object and word), together with the decentering of language and thus of those who author and authorize it, suggests that deconstruction represents not only a rupture in the traditions of Western philosophy and history, but a psychic response to those traditions that is itself founded in rupture.<sup>14</sup>

It is my belief that Derrida alchemized into philosophy a psychology deeply

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account the impact of his reading of Husserl and his confrontation with Heidegger, but my concern here is less with the specifically philosophical constituents of his thought than with the impulses that led him to reformulate philosophy in a specific deconstructive fashion.

<sup>11</sup> See my “Orations of the Dean/Silences of the Living: The Sociology of the Linguistic Turn,” in Spiegel, *The Past as Text*, 29–43.

<sup>12</sup> I am, of course, aware of the fact that the French theorist who in all likelihood most influenced *historians* was the early (that is, archaeological, or pre-genealogical) Foucault, rather than Derrida or even Lyotard. This was in part because Foucault committed himself to working out the implications of semiotics within history itself, through a study of modern epistemological regimes, or epistemes. Moreover, Foucault's notion of discourse operating within a microphysics of power, and his demonstration of the very power of discourse itself, had enormous appeal in terms of its ability to join cultural and social history within a single framework. However, to the extent that the “linguistic turn” expressed fundamental questions arising within the framework of poststructuralism, I believe that Derrida, rather than Foucault, is a better guide to what might have motivated its emergence, since Foucault remained, at least in his early phases, highly structuralist in his deployment of discourse.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Shibboleth,” in Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven, Conn., 1986), 323.

<sup>14</sup> As Derrida himself noted, deconstruction proposes the notion of a “decentered structure,” that is, a structure whose decentering is the result of “the event I called a rupture, itself, in turn, an effect of the coming into consciousness of the ‘structurality of structure.’” See Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1978), 278. Derrida does not, however, specify the “event” he calls a rupture, merely—and somewhat tautologically—presenting it as an effect of an emerging awareness of structure's struc-

marked by the Holocaust—marked by but not part of its experiential domain—in which the Holocaust figures as the absent origin that Derrida himself did so much to theorize. This is to argue that, living at a moment burdened with the inescapable consciousness of the Holocaust, Derrida emerged into the history of philosophy as a theoretician of linguistic “play,” a time synonymous with the “moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse.”<sup>15</sup>

Derrida belonged both by birth and by self-conscious identification to that “second generation” of the post-Holocaust world on whose psyche had been indelibly inscribed an event in which it did not participate, but which nonetheless constitutes the underlying narrative of the lives of its members.<sup>16</sup> Theirs was, first and foremost, a world of silence, a “silence,” as French psychologist Nadine Fresco tells us in her brilliant evocation of the psychology of the second generation, that “swallowed up the past, all the past.”<sup>17</sup> The parents of these children

transmitted only the wound to their children, to whom the memory had been refused and who grew up in the compact world of the unspeakable, amid litanies of silence . . . Life was now the *trace*, molded by death . . . The past has been utterly burnt away at the center of their lives . . . They feel their existence as a sort of exile, not from a place in the present or future, but from a time now gone forever, which would have been that of identity itself.<sup>18</sup>

They feel themselves to be “deported from meaning, their resident permits withdrawn, expelled from a lost paradise, abolished in a death in turn dissolved, dissi-

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turality, or constructed nature. One is tempted to see this as a compelling example of the intellectual displacement of a psychological phenomenon.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 292, 289. For Derrida, the articulation of “play” is central to that process of alchemization that makes writing “after Auschwitz” possible. Indeed, in a highly displaced form, this is precisely the starting point of Derrida’s critique of what he calls the “structuralist thematic of broken immediacy”: “This structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play whose other side would be Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. This affirmation then determines the non center otherwise than as loss of the center.” It probably should be noted that Derrida has repeatedly protested that “it is totally false to suggest that deconstruction is a suspension of reference . . . I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language . . . What I call text implies all the structures called ‘real,’ ‘economic,’ ‘historical,’ ‘socio-institutional,’ in short all possible referents . . . ‘There is nothing outside of the text’ . . . does not mean that all referents are suspended, denied, or enclosed in a book, as people have claimed, or have been naive enough to believe and to have accused me of believing. But it does mean that every referent and all reality has the structure of a differential trace . . . and that one cannot refer to this ‘real’ except in an interpretive experience.” Cited in Jenkins, “A Postmodern Reply to Perez Zagorin,” 190–191. See also Jacques Derrida, “Deconstructions: The Im-possible,” in Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen, eds., *French Theory in America* (New York, 2001), 13–31.

<sup>16</sup> Technically, of course, Derrida, having been born in 1930, was a bit old to be properly classified as a member of the second generation. Indeed, in 1942 he was expelled from school as a result of the lowering to 7 percent of the *numerus clausus* of Jews allowed to attend. Between then and the end of the war, he attended a school run by Jews in Algiers, experiencing in that sense the war and the anti-semitism of the Pétain regime. Nonetheless, in relation to the Holocaust and the experiences of European Jews, Derrida’s childhood in Algiers, I believe, maintains a comparable position of marginality and belatedness that informs the psychology of the second generation.

<sup>17</sup> Nadine Fresco, “Remembering the Unknown,” *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 11 (1984): 419.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 420–421.

pated . . . deported from a self that ought to have been that of another. Death is merely a matter of *substitution*.”<sup>19</sup>

It is a generation lost between the “orations” of dead bodies piled up at Auschwitz, which spoke tellingly but tragically, and the silences imposed by its elders, who literally could not “speak” the Holocaust (which was, in any case, in all senses of the word unspeakable). From their parents, this generation received only, in Erika Apfelbaum’s words, “un heritage en formes d’absences” (a legacy in the form of absences).<sup>20</sup> And linked to the notion of absence in the work of French writers of the second generation, as Ellen Fine has demonstrated, are repeated evocations of void, lack, blank, gap, and abyss. “La mémoire absente,” in the novels of Henri Raczymow, is “la mémoire trouée”: hollowed out, fragmented, ruptured.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps most striking of all in the work of these writers is their sense of the utter inadequacy of language. “The world of Auschwitz,” in George Steiner’s famous remark, “lies outside speech as it lies outside reason.”<sup>22</sup> Language “after Auschwitz” is language in a condition of severe diminishment and decline, and no one has argued more forcefully than Steiner the corruption—indeed the ruin—of language as a result of the political bestiality of our age.<sup>23</sup> And yet, for those who come after, there is nothing but language. As the protagonist in Elie Wiesel’s novel *The Fifth Son* states: “Born after the war I endure its effects. I suffer from an Event I did not even experience . . . From a past that has made History tremble, I have retained only words.”<sup>24</sup>

Both for those who survived and for those who came after, the Holocaust appears to exceed the representational capacity of language, and thus to cast suspicion on the ability of words to convey reality.<sup>25</sup> And for the second generation, the question is not even how to speak but, more profoundly, if one has a right to speak, a delegitimation of the speaking self that, turned outward, interrogates the authority, the privilege of all speech. Which, of course, is precisely what Derrida and deconstruction does in the attack on logocentrism.

It is not difficult to see the parallels between this psychology of the “second generation” and the basic tenets of poststructuralism: the feeling of life as a trace, haunted by an absent presence; its sense of indeterminacy; a belief in the ultimate undecidability of language (its aporia, in Derrida’s sense); the transgressive approaches to knowledge and authority; and, perhaps most powerfully, the conviction of the ultimately intransitive, self-reflective character of language, which seems to have lost its power to represent anything outside itself, hence to have lost its ability, finally, to signify. In its profound commitment to a fractured, fragmented, and end-

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 420–423.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Ellen S. Fine, “The Absent Memory: The Act of Writing in Post-Holocaust French Literature,” in Berel Lang, ed., *Writing and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988), 44.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>22</sup> George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York, 1986), 123.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Fine, “The Absent Memory,” 41.

<sup>25</sup> The “unrepresentable” nature of the Holocaust is the subject of a considerable literature, beginning with the essays collected in Saul Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992). See also his *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington Ind., 1993), as well as Lang, *Writing and the Holocaust*, and Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994).



lessly deferred, hence displaced, understanding of language and the (im)possibilities of meaning, poststructuralism shares with the “second generation” the anguish of belatedness, the scars of an unhealed wound of absent memory, and the legacy of silence.

It is clear as well that the sense of loss that subtends this psychology of the second generation is not confined to individuals, nor to Jews, but constitutes an entire generation’s understanding of the wreck of history attendant upon the war and the revelations of its horrors. Furthermore, I should point out that I am not the only historian to argue on behalf of the probable link between post-Holocaust and post-modern consciousness, a phenomenon that began with Habermas’s articulation of the general sense that “there [in Auschwitz] something happened that up to now nobody considered even possible . . . Auschwitz has changed the basis for the continuity of the condition of life within history.”<sup>26</sup> Such a link is also implicit in Lyotard’s metonymic use of “the jews” in *Heidegger and “the jews”* as the very figure of postmodernity, that is, of precisely what can no longer be “phrased” “after Auschwitz”—the “excess” that disrupts and puts into question all former categories of being and knowledge.<sup>27</sup> In this country, scholars such as Dominick LaCapra and Eric Santner have also insisted upon the crucial role of the Holocaust and its aftermath as, in LaCapra’s terms, “a divider between modernism and postmodernism.”<sup>28</sup> Santner argues even more forcefully that “the postmodern destabilization of certain fundamental cultural norms and notions, above all those dealing with self-identity and community, cannot be understood without reference to the ethical and intellectual imperatives of life ‘after Auschwitz.’”<sup>29</sup> Both point to the prominence of themes of loss, death, impoverishment, and mourning that pervade much of postmodern criticism and writing. In that sense, the emergence of poststructuralism under the sign of the linguistic turn bespoke the end of the confident, optimistic era of European Enlightenment with its faith in the continual progress of human history under the aegis of scientific learning and methods and, not least among them, scientific history.

It is worth noting how tied to the experiences of a single generation the transformations effected by poststructuralism and the linguistic turn appear to be, which in turn helps to explain the timing of its advent in the seventies and eighties, rather than in the years immediately following the war. The preoccupations of the surviving postwar generation lay with rebuilding Europe, and in America with the emerging Cold War conflict and the rise of McCarthyism. Apart, perhaps, from the refugee historians themselves, whose impact on the development of German and European history in this country was noted by David Pinkney in his presidential address of 1980, leaders of the historical profession took surprisingly little note of the possible impact that the war and its aftermath might have on the practice of history.<sup>30</sup> As Europe struggled to reconstitute its social fabric, social history reigned supreme, a fact sig-

<sup>26</sup> Cited in the introduction to Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews,”* trans. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts, introduction by David Carroll (Minneapolis, 1990).

<sup>28</sup> LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust*, 188.

<sup>29</sup> Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990), xiv.

<sup>30</sup> David H. Pinkney, “American Historians on the European Past,” 1980 AHA Presidential Address, *American Historical Review* 86, no. 1 (February 1981): 3–4.

naled by the dominance of Annaliste historiography throughout the continent and the United States and the prestige of social history more generally everywhere.<sup>31</sup>

Not until the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies, that is, with the maturing of the second generation, did the psychology that I have sought to describe begin to come into play. The first mention of the term “postmodern” in an AHA presidential address does not appear until 1978, with William J. Bouwsma’s address on “The Renaissance and the Drama of Western History,” who notes it only to confess that “I am . . . bewildered by the suggestion that we have now entered into a ‘postmodern’ age.” Bouwsma did acknowledge that

the epistemological decisions embedded in language are thus the pre-condition of human apprehension of an external world; culture in this sense is prior to both materialism and idealism, which represent contrary efforts to assign ontological status to—in the language of sociology, to legitimize—a world whose actual source in the creativity of man violates the all-too-human need for transcendence . . . Beyond this, history as construction often tends to be a misleading and sometimes pernicious reification.<sup>32</sup>

A decade later, in 1989, David Harlan clearly labeled the emergence of post-structuralism an epistemological crisis for historical study in the pages of the *American Historical Review*, asserting that the linguistic turn has “questioned our belief in a fixed and determinable past, compromised the possibility of historical representation, and undermined our ability to locate ourselves in time. The result of all this has been to reduce historical knowledge to a tissue of remnants and fabrications concealing, it is said, an essential absence.”<sup>33</sup> By 1997, Joyce Appleby, in her presidential address on “The Power of History,” forthrightly declared that poststructuralism and the linguistic turn had created an epistemological crisis among historians and their publics and argued on behalf of a balanced return to the importance of social history, one that continued to acknowledge the interpretive power of post-structuralist theories of discourse and what she called “language’s insinuating codes” and their shaping force in the cultural formation of the individual and society, but simultaneously sought to have historians appreciate that history “has an irreducible positivistic element” and that its power derives from the persistence of the past in the present, compelling us to reconstruct it.<sup>34</sup>

Today, some thirty years or so after the introduction of poststructuralism and the “linguistic turn,” there is a growing sense of dissatisfaction with its overly systematic account of the operation of language in the domain of human endeavors of all kinds, even among those committed to its fundamental postulates and insights. As William

<sup>31</sup> For excellent descriptions of how the rise of social history occurred, see Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2005), and William H. Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005). See also the *AHR* Forum on Eley’s book and Eley’s response, *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (April 2008): 391–437.

<sup>32</sup> William J. Bouwsma, “The Renaissance and the Drama of Western History,” 1978 AHA Presidential Address, *American Historical Review* 84, no. 1 (February 1979): 5, 11.

<sup>33</sup> David Harlan, “Intellectual History and the Return of Literature,” *American Historical Review* 94, no. 3 (June 1989): 581.

<sup>34</sup> Joyce Appleby, “The Power of History,” 1997 AHA Presidential Address, *American Historical Review* 103, no. 1 (February 1998): 12, 14. Appleby joined with Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob in an attempt to redress what they saw as poststructuralism’s exaggeratedly “ironic, perhaps even despairing view of the world, one that, in its extreme forms, offers little role for history as previously known”; Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1994), 207.

Sewell has noted, there has been “a pervasive reaction against the concept of culture as a system of symbols and meanings, inclining rather to the belief that culture is a sphere of practical activity shot through by willful action, power relations, struggle, contradiction and change.”<sup>35</sup> In this view, culture emerges less as a systematic structure than as a repertoire of competencies, a “tool kit,” a regime of practical rationality, or a set of strategies guiding action, whereby symbols/signs are mobilized to identify those aspects of the agent’s experience which, in this process, are made meaningful, that is, experientially “real.”

Culture, thereby, is recast as a “performative term,” one realized only processually as “signs put to work” to “reference” and interpret the world.<sup>36</sup> Historical investigation, from this perspective, takes practice (not structure) as the starting point of social analysis, since practice emerges here as the space in which a meaningful intersection between discursive constitution and individual initiative occurs. This initiative is, in the first instance, cognitive, a subject’s ongoing reformulation of values, priorities, interests, and behaviors in terms provided, but not governed, by available discourses or languages (i.e., sign systems).<sup>37</sup>

In light of the accumulating discontent with poststructuralism and its model of language as the constituent of human culture and behavior, it is fair to say that the “semiotic challenge” has been addressed, absorbed, and—most important—that the dominant concerns of historical thought and writing are currently undergoing a process of alteration, although the precise direction in which we are moving and the modes and methodologies by which historical research and writing will be framed are difficult to discern. Still, we need to pose the question: Whither history? If we have, indeed, as Nancy Partner now argues, entered the post-postmodern period, what does this include, and what is being left behind? What remains relevant and useful for the directions in which historiographical practice is likely to move, and to what extent does our understanding of the forces and conditions that fostered the linguistic turn in the first place inform these developments? As she notes, it is highly unlikely that we will return to “quasi-scientific realism, naïve empiricism, or any of the pre-postmodern assumptions that informed the writing of history.”<sup>38</sup> Nor is it likely that most historians will answer the call to “sublime historical experience” recently issued by F. R. Ankersmit.<sup>39</sup> Candidates for new topics of central concern, set forth, for example, by Michael Roth, include “ethics, intensity, postcolonialism, empire, the sacred, cosmopolitanism, trauma and animals.”<sup>40</sup> “All these proposed

<sup>35</sup> William Sewell, “The Concept(s) of Culture,” in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999), 44.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 45. See also Richard Biernacki, “Language and the Shift from Signs to Practices in Cultural Inquiry,” *History and Theory* 30 (2000): 289–310.

<sup>37</sup> For a much fuller discussion of current revisions to the poststructuralist understanding of subjectivity, see my introduction to Gabrielle M. Spiegel, ed., *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (London, 2005), 11–18.

<sup>38</sup> Nancy Partner, “Narrative Persistence: The Post-Postmodern Life of Narrative Theory,” in Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domanska, and Hans Kellner, eds., *Re-Figuring Hayden White* (forthcoming from Stanford University Press), 2. I would like to thank Professor Partner for sharing this essay with me before its publication.

<sup>39</sup> See Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford, Calif., 2005).

<sup>40</sup> Roth, “Ebb Tide,” 66. To this list one might add the study of affects, which seems to be experiencing something of a boom at the moment. It might also be pointed out that Roth’s list of “new” topics of consideration includes many matters that were already the subject of intense investigation during the

new topics,” Partner remarks, “share a common desire to escape language, restore a pure and immediate connection with the past or at least some central aspect of experience and generally deny the power of language to contaminate ‘history’ with its own uncontrollable meanings.”<sup>41</sup>

We can agree, I think, that the historical concerns of the next generation will be quite different, as is usually the case, especially in periods of rapid change such as we have been experiencing over the last few decades, not least in the realm of technology and the spread of global capital. Yet it is not equally clear to me that the fundamental insights of poststructuralism are—or should be—so easily jettisoned. If, as I have argued, deconstruction, poststructuralism, and some varieties of postmodernism in their psychic impulses enact a philosophy of rupture and displacement, to what extent are the insights generated by them still valuable for what is likely to be the dominant concern of historians in the coming generation? This is not to argue that there is a fundamental continuity in the psychological shaping or intellectual goals of the rising generation, or that its members are necessarily bound to the agendas earlier generated by the war and its aftermath. Only that we can and should continue to appreciate and employ what poststructuralism has taught us by and in its enactment of the complex tensions that shape the contemporary world. The question is to identify what remains valuable in the legacy of the linguistic turn, at least insofar as there exists, or might exist, an underlying commonality between the nature and needs of historical thought and writing under the sign of the linguistic turn and the new historiographical agendas in the process of being crafted by historians now and in the coming years.

It seems probable that as our consciousness of the penetration of global capitalism and its impact on all forms of social formation grows, historical writing will increasingly be influenced by the problematics fostered by this development and will, therefore, create new objects of investigation. This is already apparent in the growing concern with questions of diaspora, migration, immigration, and the rapidly developing field of transnational history, with its focus on what Françoise Lionnet has termed “minority cultures,” which deploys a global perspective that emphasizes the basic hybridity of global cultures in the postcolonial and postmodern world.<sup>42</sup>

That the field of “transnationalism” should appear as the sign of this shift in consciousness, a field in part promoted by the movement of new groups of scholars into the profession, is hardly unexpected and may be seen as one of the social determinants of this reorientation and revision in current historiography. And since the signal characteristic of these new fields of inquiry is that they entail the study of discontinuities in the experiences of, and displacements of location in, the lives of their subjects as a result of migration, exile, war, and the like, perhaps it is also apposite to inquire into the losses experienced in the process of migration, exile, and diasporic movement. Such a question might interrogate, and seek to nuance, the rather triumphalist tone of current work on transnationalism, with its celebration of

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high tide of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Thus the extent to which this list genuinely reflects new agendas is somewhat problematic. For what I see as more likely candidates for new areas of historical inquiry, see below.

<sup>41</sup> Partner, “Narrative Persistence,” 2–3.

<sup>42</sup> See Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, eds., *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham, N.C., 2005).

fluidity and hybridity, multiplicity and mobility, by inquiring into the sense of loss of cultural identity that often accompanies displacement from one's homeland, language, and culture.

More pertinent still is the utility of certain insights proffered by poststructuralism to the enormously expanding field of diaspora studies, for that field shares with the post-Holocaust generation a legacy in terms of the very notion of "diaspora," which seems now, however, to function as a covering term and concept employed to characterize cultures of displacement in the broadest possible sense, such as (to borrow James Clifford's accounting) *border*, *travel*, *creolization*, *transculturation*, *hybridity*, and *transnational migrant circuits*.<sup>43</sup> To these might be added *exile*, *expatriation*, *post-coloniality*, *migrancy*, *globality*, and *transnationality*.<sup>44</sup> The one common thread that runs through these various characterizations of "diaspora" is that of "de-territorialized identities."<sup>45</sup> According to this view, "de-territorialization" paradoxically occurs as diasporic peoples root themselves physically in their "hostlands," but refuse (or are refused) assimilation to them, producing a sense of dual belonging and cultural consciousness that resists locating identity fully in either home- or hostland. In this context, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out, diasporic discourse is strong on displacement, detachment, uprooting, and dispersion—on "disarticulation"—but is less clear about how re-articulation takes place: how the local is produced and what forms it takes in the space of dispersal, or how, precisely, it relates to the culture of origin.<sup>46</sup> As a conceptual device, the idea of "de-territorialized identity" seems to reflect the recognition that in the context of a world increasingly marked by migrations, cultural as well as economic globalization, intermarriage, and unbounded intercommunication, questions of home, community, allegiance, and hence identity are constantly being redefined. At the same time, it provides an analytical framework that allows scholars to talk about these processes from a global perspective, one independent of the nation-state as the framing unit of discussion.

<sup>43</sup> James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* 9 (1994): 303. For an extraordinary list of what currently is counted as a "diaspora," one need only go to Wikipedia's List of Diasporas, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_diasporas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_diasporas), where the term is applied to a host of population movements and displacements in relation to peoples and phenomena as diverse as, to name only a few, the Albanians, Basques, Chechens, Sikhs, Fiji Islanders, Vikings, Lebanese, Indians (South Asians), Chinese, Koreans, Tibetans, Ukrainians, Portuguese, Irish, Tamil, Palestinians, and the "hip-hop" diaspora (i.e., musical forms associated with hip-hop culture and rap music, known in Europe as "Spaghetti funk"!)." "Diaspora" is also employed metaphorically, as William Safran points out, to characterize *alien residents*, *political refugees*, and *ethnic and racial minorities*, thus adding to the already overly rich stew of referents. See Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora* 1 (1991): 83–99. At its furthest definitional reach, "diaspora" has even been applied to what Gayatri Spivak calls "microelectronic diasporas" generated by digital technologies that allow widely dispersed people to imagine and thus to constitute themselves as a voluntary community based on self-selection and communication, a community that possessed no common homeland in the past nor seeks to create one in the future other than that imaginatively enabled by the Internet; Spivak, "Who Claims Alterity?" in Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani, eds., *Remaking History* (Seattle, 1989), 276. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out, "the instantaneity of telecommunication produces an extreme case of physical distance and social proximity under conditions of disembodied presence and the immateriality of place"—entirely routes without roots. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Spaces of Dispersal," *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 342.

<sup>44</sup> See the interesting discussion of the term in Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Uses of Diaspora," *Social Text* 66 (2001): 45–73. Edwards also provides a valuable sketch of the evolution of the term as applied to the African diaspora in relation to changing historical needs and contexts.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Steven Vertovec, "Three Meanings of 'Diaspora,' Exemplified among South Asian Religions," *Diaspora* 6 (1997): 1.

<sup>46</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Spaces of Dispersal," 339.



This, in turn, poses the question of the relationship, real or imagined, of “diaspora” as a form of consciousness to the nation-state, traditionally considered to function as the place where individual and social identities are shaped. Indeed, the new conceptual field of “diaspora” would appear to function as a means of transvaluing the term, which for much of its history was a mark of failure in relation to the normative ideal of the nation-state, but now betokens a privileged transcendence of national identity in favor of transnational bonds. The widespread use of “diaspora” in the field of Africana studies offers the most illuminating example here, both because it possesses the most complex relationship to a notion of “homeland” (forming what has been called a “stateless diaspora,” that is, one without a *common* country of origin, language, religion, or culture) and because it represents the most pervasive use of the term “diaspora” in current academic circles.

The “stateless power” of “diaspora,” as Khachig Tölölyan has shown, resides in “a heightened awareness of the rewards as well as the burdens of multiple belonging, and in the exemplary grappling with the paradoxes of such belonging.”<sup>47</sup> Diaspora communities, in this sense, must actively reproduce an identity with “homeland” and maintain contact with it or, where it does not exist, with a mythical notion of homeland, since a commitment, real or imagined, to multilocality is a central feature of diasporic consciousness. Thus, as Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge point out, “diasporas always leave a trail of collective memory about another place and time and create new maps of desire and of attachment,” the result of which is not necessarily the consolidation of identities, but more often the fracturing of memories.<sup>48</sup> One analytic feature of the concept of diaspora, therefore, is that it is fundamentally dialogic, constantly negotiating a willed relationship between “here” and “there” tantamount, as well, to the relationship between “now” and “then,” the present and the past, presence and absence. In that sense, I would argue, diaspora studies and its related fields of transnationalism, immigration, and migration history are fundamentally concerned, as in the case of poststructuralism, with the problematics of displacement and absent or fractured memory. To the extent that this is true, they are involved, *by definition*, in questions of displaced persons and absent memory, and any notions of identity and subjectivity that they seek to deploy necessarily will be dependent on an understanding of memory as constructed narrative, and hence on language as the ultimate bearer of the particular form of historical consciousness entailed in diasporic being. It is here that I see the continuing utility of poststructuralist notions of the constitutive force of language in the shaping of identity and the relationship between the self/subject and experience.

Given this, the new historiography doubtless will also require a revised understanding of subjectivity as something more than the discursively constituted “subject positions” framed in poststructuralist theory, but also something other than a wholly re-centered humanist subject.<sup>49</sup> Although recent literature on the topics of self and

<sup>47</sup> Khachig Tölölyan, “Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless in the Transnational Moment,” *Diaspora* 5 (1996): 8.

<sup>48</sup> Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, “On Moving Targets,” *Public Culture* 2 (1989): i. Cited in Vertovec, “Three Meanings of ‘Diaspora,’” 9.

<sup>49</sup> For a discussion of what I have called the return of an actor-centered or “neo-phenomenological” understanding of subjectivity and agency, one that highlights the disjunction between culturally given meanings and the individual uses of them in contingent, historically conditioned ways, see my intro-

agency has been sharply critical of the fracturing, decentering effects of poststructuralist formulations, I see scant evidence of an appeal to return to pre-linguistic turn notions of the centered, humanist subject. Rather, what Amanda Anderson has called the “post-poststructuralist turn to subjectivity” might approach the human actor in both past and present, she argues, by means of a “postconventional” understanding of identity and its formation.<sup>50</sup> In her account, this takes the form of a rationally governed and continually refashioned sense of self, informed by self-reflective and self-critical understandings arrived at through dialogue with both the self and others. Such an approach seeks to restore to human agents the depth psychology, self-awareness, and rationality capable of governing behavior, but it also includes “a recognition of the historical conditions”—including the discursive—“out of which beliefs and values emerge, as well as the possibility for the ongoing recognition of the many forces (psychological, social and political) that can thwart, undermine, or delay the[ir] achievements.”<sup>51</sup>

In light of this, one might speculate that however one construes the generational locus of the new work on transnationalism and diaspora studies, it remains the case that the much more diverse cultural and intellectual global field within which it operates introduces complexities that historians in the past for the most part were not forced to address, and for which there are few guides at present. If work in these fields can be seen from one perspective as innovative ways of dealing with and reformulating earlier questions that arose in the context of the identity politics of the civil rights and post-civil rights era, then how does the affirmation of multiple belonging or plural citizenship complicate the story, seeing national boundaries as permeable and not necessarily constitutive of identity?<sup>52</sup> If not from the nation, society, or domicile, from where does social identity derive its shape? If we are at once citizens of the world and citizens and subjects of specific nations, how are the contradictions implicit in this form of multilocality negotiated on both the individual and the collective level?

We live in a moment of great cultural instability and uncertainty. As historians, we struggle to know the absent and the other, to affirm a right to words and to speech. Like Derrida, we are “trying to write the question: (what is) meaning to say?”<sup>53</sup> Precisely what instruments we will deploy in the pursuit of our historical labors is not entirely clear. But I persist in believing that there is one thing that deconstruction has taught us, more powerfully than any other strategy of reading that I know of, and that is to listen to silence. As historians of the past, we are constantly engaged in attending, as Paul Zumthor has written, “to the discourse of some invisible other that

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duction to *Practicing History*, 11–18. A particularly cogent examination of this problem and its implications for historiography can be found in a collection of articles by William H. Sewell, Jr., in his *Logics of History*. Particularly useful among them are “A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency and Transformation” (124–151) and “Concept(s) of Culture” (152–174). For a list of some recent bibliography on this topic, see also my contribution to the *AHR* Forum on Geoff Eley’s book, “Comment on *A Crooked Line*,” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (April 2008): 406–416.

<sup>50</sup> Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (Princeton, N.J., 2006), 172.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>52</sup> I am indebted to Nathan Connolly for the specific formulation of these questions.

<sup>53</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1981), 14.

speaks to us from some deathbed, of which the exact location is unknown. We strive to hear the echo of a voice which, somewhere, probes, knocks against the world's silences, begins again, is stifled."<sup>54</sup> Our most fundamental task as historians, I would argue, is to solicit those fragmented inner narratives to emerge from their silences. In the last analysis, what is the past but a once material existence now silenced, extant only as sign and as sign drawing to itself chains of conflicting interpretations that hover over its absent presence and compete for possession of the relics, seeking to invest traces of significance upon the bodies of the dead.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Zumthor, *Speaking of the Middle Ages*, trans. Sarah White (Lincoln, Nebr., 1986), 37.

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