

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE: A DISPUTE BETWEEN CONSTRUCTIONISM AND SCIENTIFIC REALISM

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Abstract. An intense discussion about the issue of historical narrative arose during the time when the naïve realism of classical historiography was being critiqued and led to a dispute, in the last century, between constructionism and critical or scientific realism. We can distinguish between constructionism and noetic constructivism. According to ontological constructionism all facts are human constructions; according to noetic constructivism, our notions and theories are constructs with objective meaning (sense and reference); they refer to objective reality. Scientific realism recognizes the existence of noetic construction but does not regard facts as our constructions, as pure fictions. The point of contention is the question over whether historical narrative is merely a discursive construction or whether it is also a scientific reconstruction of the past. Resolving the dispute over whether historical narrative can be objectively true, or whether it is subject to empirical control or not, is dependent on finding the answer to this question.

Keywords: historical narrative; ontological constructionism; noetic constructivism; scientific realism.

Introduction

An intense discussion about the issue of historical narrative arose during the time when the naïve realism of classical historiography was being critiqued and led to a dispute, in the last century, between constructionism and critical or scientific realism. We can distinguish between constructionism and noetic constructivism. According to ontological constructionism all facts are human constructions; according to noetic constructivism, our notions and theories are constructs with objective meaning (sense and reference); they refer to objective reality. Scientific realism recognizes the existence of noetic construction but does not regard facts as our constructions, as pure fictions.¹ The point of contention is the question over whether historical narrative is merely a discursive construction or whether it is also a scientific reconstruction

¹ We realize that the concept of noetic constructivism is not unambiguous. According to constructionism, noetic constructions have no sense or reference, they do not relate to objective reality, only to mental constructs of the human mind. Naïve realism recognizes their relation to extralingual objects that can be perceived by our senses. Scientific realism recognizes constructs which have sense and refer to extralingual objects that are directly observable or unobservable. We are also aware of the disputes over the character of social fact. Constructionism understands social facts as fictitious constructions; naïve realism as the given states of things; and scientific realism as the real state or change in the state of the object which the subject reconstructs in its thinking in the form of verified true factographic statements (Černík, Viceník 2005).

of the past. Resolving the dispute over whether historical narrative can be objectively true, or whether it is subject to empirical control or not, is dependent on finding the correct answer to this question.

The term “narrative” is often conceived differently in different models of historical research. It will therefore be useful to compare the characteristics of the philosophy of history of R. G. Collingwood and that of J. Pomorski (Collingwood 1939/1986, 1-204; Pomorski 1991, 53-77, 116-117). They reveal the ideals of historical research as presented in various schools or paradigms of historical methodology from ancient times. We shall deal with them in what follows.

The “Scissors and Glue” Historian

We are concerned with the characteristics of the initial stage in the development of historical research, which is characterized by the absence of a deeper conceptualization of the subject matter of research; the idea that would direct the researcher’s practices. His/her research activities focus on a search for information resources and on their insertion into the text of a narrative. The narrative is built on the basis of excerpts from the resources and the historian’s task is the editing and stylistics. This model of historiography was typical of Greco-Roman historiography based on the historiography of its founders—Herodotus and Thucydides—e.g. of Polybius, Livius and Tacitus, and it has survived in its relics to modern age.

The Historian as a Collector of Facts

Here, we are interested in an ideal, stemming from attempts to overcome the “scissors and glue” method from the position of naturalism by imitating the methodology of natural science. It was characteristic of historiographic positivism. It was shaped by the cult of historical fact and a naïve conviction that events are created from isolated facts as “historical atoms” explicable on the basis of “universal laws”. Its characteristic feature was a cumulative vision of science, cursory historicism (the ahistorical understanding of human nature), a factographic methodology, naïve realism and programmed objectivism.

The Historian on the Track of Truth

According to this model, the ideal work of a historian should resemble the work of a detective. Historical sources should be conceived as proof of evidence. The essence of history is the world of the mind, the world of past human experience. The historian’s task is to penetrate the world of events through an analysis of the mind of the person who caused it. The subject matter of history is intentional human action, its method is an interpretation of evidence and its sense is the self-knowledge of the human (mind). Such an ideal was characteristic of the philosophy of history of R. G. Collingwood and his proponents.

History as a Pure Intellectual Game

History is not scientific research but a discourse about the past under particular rules. The main goal of science is to ascertain the truth; in historiography it is a matter of providing intellectual entertainment. Historiography is not a reconstruction of the past (that is over), but the narrative construction of the historian. It is a purely intellectual discipline, where experience

plays no role as a criterion. The available historical sources initiate an intellectual game. Historiography is not therefore concerned with the truth of its statements. Historical narrative is a function of the linguistic dispositions of its author. In-depth linguistic structures determine a priori the way its ontological categories are defined. The historian therefore does not describe what actually happened but rather the style of discourse about the past as applied by other historians. Only the theory of discourse, the analysis of a literary text, rhetorics and semantics fall within the historian's methodology. It is a conception characteristic of the constructionism applied by J. Goldstein, Hayden White, Peter Munz and F. R. Ankersmit.

History as the Study of Problems

According to this conception, history is not a simple set of events but a complex and multifaceted process, in which people and events are interlaced. To learn more about the way of life of people in the past, the postulate of history should be shifted from the events to the research into the problem. The subject matter of historical research is not exclusively limited to that which took place in time and space but includes the problems of human beings in particular circumstances. The work of a historian starts not from observation but from the conceptualization of what has to be explored. Historical sources should be conceived as an empirical basis for testing historical hypotheses. This ideal of a historian's work was characteristic of the French Annales school. It was developed for example in the works of M. Bloch and L. Febvre and other authors.

History as Social Science

History should be built on the basis of the model of the developed social sciences. In his/her research, the historian should draw on the theories of other sciences and test them on historical material. In the analysis of empirical data, the historian should use quantification and the modelling method. Theoretical models should be used to explain that which is observable. Emphasis is laid on the justification of logical-methodological explanation and a thorough verification of the validity of historical claims. It is underscored that historiography is not a mere reconstruction of inherited information: it needs to go beyond its horizons on the basis of new ideas and present knowledge. This model of historical science has been and still is close to what is referred to as *new American history*, which developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s and which focused on developing economic and sociological history. See for instance, the works of D.S. Landes, Ch. Tilly, W. Fogel, S.L. Engerman, R. Anderan, D.C. North, and others.²

Theoretical and Explanatory History

In this paradigm, history is conceived as one of the key social sciences. Its specific feature does not consist in simply adapting other socio-scientific theories but in building its own historical theory. The historian's work cannot be conducted without conceptualizing the subject matter of its research: it presupposes a theoretical reflection of the past within a web of ontological, methodological, and axiological categories that regulates the processes

² For an analysis and overview of the characteristics of social history and its consequences for changes in the methods of historical research see Appelby (2002, 123-124).

of historical research. The theoreticization of historical science goes hand in hand with the process of concretizing the form of the historical narrative. An important instrument is the use of realistically interpreted historical models. The theoretical conceptualization of the subject matter of historical research is interlinked with a theoretical reflection on the development of historiography. The methodology of history is being constructed as a metascientific discipline. It consists in recognizing the common methodological awareness of historians, which is the basis for developing the applied methodology of the practices of particular historians and historical schools and/or the system of rules used within a particular paradigm in historical research. One of the key principles of theoretical and explanatory history is a guideline on integral explication based on the interconnection between nomological explanation and humanistic interpretation. Its characteristic feature is the formalization of the language of historical narrative. Emphasis is laid on the theoretical and explanatory profoundness of historical narrative and on the necessity of justifying statements about historical reality. This ideal of history has been chiefly developed in the methodological works close to the Poznan school.

Overcoming Substantialism

The above overview shows that the development of historiography and its methodology has shifted from traditional historiography, which is not yet a comprehensive science, to a theoretically profound historiography, which is conceived as an autonomous scientific discipline. We agree with J. Pomorski that the transition from traditional historiography to theoretical and explanatory historiography that took place in the second half of the last century displays the characteristics of a scientific revolution.³

One of the essential preconditions for understanding the specifics of a historical method is overcoming *classical substantialism*, where human nature or the structure of society was regarded as a substrate given once and for all by immutable God-given laws and the laws of nature. The position of classical substantialism was, as R. G. Collingwood (1939/1986, 82) had shown earlier, antihistorical in character, and incompatible with the nature of historical investigation. One of the negative consequences of this standpoint was the existence of the antinomies of naturalism and antinaturalism, nomothetism and idiographism, synchronism and diachronism; the separation of theoretical and historical sciences. The essential precondition for overcoming these antinomies is the understanding that human nature, the structure of society, and social laws are historical and historically conditioned in character (Černík and Viceník 2005, 71-114). The difference between the theoretical and historical sciences does not lie in whether or not they are grounded in scientific theories, but in the fact that the theoretical knowledge of the historical sciences does not proceed from theory to experience: it is developed within the empirical form, in the form of historical narrative.

³ The models of historiography are independent, disjunctive. Each of the following paradigms critically builds on its predecessors. There can be relations of correspondence and incommensurability between them. It was for instance the Annales school and Marxism that influenced the development of social history as a legitimate component of historical research (Appleby 2002, 68-72). The Poznan school builds on Collingwood, Marx, the Annales school and on the school of history as social science. J. Topolski (1984, 53-182) presents the classification of patterns, paradigms, reflections on writing history from ancient times to the 20th century. For the characteristics of changes connected with the development of scientific history, understanding its subject and methodological innovations, see Appleby et al. (2002).

The problem is that not all narratives are historical narratives and that many historical texts do not have a narrative form. For instance, we can distinguish between artistic and historical narrative. There are fictional narratives, identified by some authors as historical narratives and there are histories that do not have the structure of narrative, although their organization of historical events (annals, chronicles) is diachronic. The concept of narrative itself is not identical in all historiographical models or paradigms and is the subject of discussion and polemic. According to J. Pomorski, polemics are mainly concerned with the following questions: 1. What is the subject matter of the theory of historical narrative? Is it historical writing or is it formed of abstract, a priori linguistic structures that create a special “poetics” of historical narrative? 2. What form does historical narrative take? Is it an action or a result of this action (text, discourse) that reflects something about the past or is it merely a form of discourse, a way of speaking or writing about the past? 3. What is the narrative formed from? Is it simply a set of statements or is it more comprehensive, developing into an image of the past? 4. How is historical narrative related to its referent? According to critical or scientific realism the question of the relation between the narrative and what has happened is of primary importance in solving the problem of its truthfulness; according to ontological constructivism, this relation does not play a crucial role in its construction (Pomorski 1991, 128-133).

In the methodology of the historical sciences there are also disputes over what the best historical narrative ought to be like: should it be a narrative that is convincing or a narrative that is instructive? Does historical narrative also have an evaluative aspect or should it be exempt from evaluation? Should historical narrative be an explanation, interpretation or presentation of the past? Is historical narrative an ideological reconstruction of the past or is it its imitation? Does historical narrative contain only factual statements or is it a theoretical model of historical reality that articulates its essential structure and can thus contain not only factual but also idealized statements? (Pomorski 1991, 134-138)

M. Stanford indicates that it is necessary to distinguish between *two basic levels of historical writing*. Its essential purpose is *to say what happened*; its second, higher level, is to create stories. All historians describe what happened but only some of them create a story (Stanford 1988, 213-222, 225). According to A. C. Danto, historical narrative is both a description and an explanation of historical events and/or the description and explanation of how they change, the transition from one event to another one. It is a story with a beginning, middle, and end. It is formed by filling in the middle between the beginning and the end. It is a description and explanation of how change proceeds from the very beginning to the end and it assumes the continual identity of the subject of the change. It may, but does not have to, rely on scientific law. In the case of atomic narrative, it is the description and explanation of the simple change from *F* to *G* that is mediated by an event *U* that is important. In the case of molecular narrative, it is the description and explanation of the complex transition from *F* to *I* that is mediated by a series of changes from *F* to *G*, *G* to *H*... *H* to *I*. According to Danto, atomic narrative can only rely on a “covering law”, while molecular narrative can only rely on a “historical law”. But Danto’s reply to the question of whether such a law exists is hesitant: perhaps, perhaps not (Danto 1968, 235, 238, 251-252, 254-255).

J. Topolski defines historical narrative as a narrative whole; its construction involves two essential phases: the starting point of constructing a narrative is the process of establishing the information about particular historical facts by critically analyzing the sources, retrieving them from multifarious primary interpretations. The second essential step is putting together the formal (in terms of logic and grammar), contextually linked stream of information about the facts. The construction of a historical narrative consists of the historian’s selection of

information from a mass of information sources. These are then placed in a hierarchy, subjected to an explanation of historical facts including both the rational explanation (humanistic interpretation) of human action and the deductive nomological explanation of the consequences of human action; and finally, that particular fragment of the past is described and explained by a historian and incorporated into a broader narrative whole.

A sufficient knowledge of logic and grammar is according to Topolski required for the narrative to be organized in an appropriate formal arrangement. The narrative itself does not guarantee the contextual linking of the historical facts. For this purpose, the historian requires the relevant intellectual tools, such as generalization, theory, and metaphor. In generalizing historical facts, the historian uses the methods of abstraction, idealization, and concretization, and the method of incomplete and complete induction; in the analysis of the internal links between historical facts the historian uses a network of theoretical concepts, for instance the concept of nation, state, revolution, culture, civilization. S/he also uses a variety of methodological formats: idealized theory and/or the system of idealized statements and concretizations (Topolski 1977; 1998, 136-145).

The potential and the character of the theoretical profoundness of historiography follows on, in our opinion, from the specific character of historical research, which is an integration of two contradictory procedures: logico-historical retrospection and historical genesis. The former is an “anatomical key” to history. At the beginning, the scientific analysis of the historical norms of society follows a route that is in contradiction to its actual development. It begins *post festum* and uses the results prepared in the process of development (Marx 1985, 78). The anatomy of capitalism is the key to the anatomy of pre-capitalist forms of society; the anatomy of quantum mechanics is the anatomical key to the anatomy of classical mechanics.

The meaning of logico-historical retrospection is held in the fact that it: 1. helps to reveal the internal laws of human social systems; 2. allows for a better understanding of the significance of historical events and historical personalities; 3. is conducive to constructing a historical story; and 4. is a way of conceptualizing historical research, which Danto called “conceptual evidence”. For instance, there is a substantial difference between the statements: “Isaac Newton was born on 4th January 1643”; “Isaac Newton, the author of *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, was born on 4th January 1643”; and “Isaac Newton, the founder of classical mechanics, was born on 4th January 1643”. The second statement includes information on Newton’s life story and the third one recognizes the difference between classical and quantum mechanics.

Historical genesis is based on the outcomes of logico-historical retrospection. It may take on the character of *theoretically profound genesis*, it may contain the above-mentioned integrative explanation—which is a combination of nomological explanation and humanistic interpretation. Nomological explanation is conceived here as an explanation based on specific social (e.g. economic) laws which are substantially historical in character (they always exist and only in places where their limited immanent conditions set in law can be found); this applies in the analysis of complex human social systems and the processes of their transformation (analysis of the process of the transformation of social systems and their laws is a specific subject matter in historiography; historicism without an analysis of the historicity of social laws is cursory historicism). The humanistic interpretation is understood here as a scientifically profound reconstruction (based on the idealized principle of the rationality of the actor) of the goal and meaning of individual and collective human action (Černík and Vícenák 2005, 115-141, 143-179).

A historian usually does not mark out the theoretical basis of historical narrative: s/he does not articulate it in a pure, abstract form but uses an empirical, narrative form. The historian can rely on scientific laws but s/he does not outline them in pure form. S/he does not proceed

deductively from laws to the forms of their expression, but selects forms in which they are typically expressed and then proceeds from the typical to the atypical. Metaphor can also fulfil a theoretical role as, for example, in the statement “Sixteenth century Poland was the breadbasket of Europe” or the statement “Central Europe was struck by silver fever after the discovery of rich silver-bearing lodes in Kutná Hora towards the end of the 13th century”. Constructing the holistic narrative image of the past also requires, in other words, a particular literary processing.

In this respect the question regarding the relationship *of historical narrative to artistic thought* comes to the fore. A certain period of historiographical and artistic thinking led several authors to identify them as one and the same. For instance, B. Croce (1941, 66-67) categorizes history as belonging to the general concept of art: the only difference he sees in them is the fact that history operates within a logical spirit, whereas a work of art operates within the imagination. B. Russell (1954, 4-5) states that in history, artistic qualities are greater than the qualities of scientific method. J. A. Passmore (1966, 94) understands history to be something between literature and science. According to A. V. Gulyga (1972, 54-55), historical generalization is a specific synthesis of a theoretical and artistic attempt to make the world one's own. According to H. White (2000, 40), the status of historiography should be analyzed according to the categories of the opposition between science and literature: historiography is a kind of art, a combination of art and science.

There is no doubt that the element of literary interpretation in discourse plays a much more significant role in the historical sciences than in what is known as the theoretical sciences. It is also beyond doubt that historiography cannot function without constructing a story. There is, however, a substantial difference between constructing a story, i.e. emplotment in artistic literature and in historiography.

Emplotment, constructing stories in artistic literature (in prose and poetry) is the articulation of fantasy, fictional reality, where imaginary, unreal events are presented as truth. It does not imply that artistic stories are meaningless. Artistic narrative can be meaningful, even if it is not true. Artistic narrative is usually not a mere subjective construction. It is also a kind of objective knowledge that helps people orientate themselves in the chaos of human life, perceive the world in which they live as something intelligible. It assumes deep knowledge of real human life stories, the ability to understand actual human feelings and emotions. At the end of his fairy-tale *The Tale of the Golden Cockerel*, Pushkin tells us that although his story is fictional, it has an important message. Marx said that he often learned much more about classical capitalism from Balzac's novels than from some of the papers written by political economists. Umberto Eco has shown us that although some elements of historical novels depend on the real world, others depend on the decision taken by the author. The author of the historical novel can, for example, select a world for his/her narration, although the characters “have to observe the laws of the world where they live” (Eco 2004, 476, 493).

Emplotment, constructing stories in historiography is the articulation, through description and explanation, of real historical events, of the thoughts and actions of real historical people. Historiography presupposes, as does art, imagination and creative fantasy, but it should not present unreal, imaginary stories as scientific truth, as something real, as a historical fact. A historian may also select the period to be investigated. The historian has to be aware of the fact, even more than the author of a historical novel, that the characters in his/her narrative “have to observe the laws of the world where they live”. The explanatory depth of the historian's narrative depends to a large extent on the knowledge of such laws. It is a mistake if a historian describes human actions in ancient and feudal society according to the “logic” of capitalism or if s/he takes up a hand-axe instead of “capital”.

The historian may create the context according to certain intentions but s/he cannot create the facts, people, events or situations. The intentions of a historian bear similarity to the concept of intent in criminal law in that the circumstantial evidence is based on certain facts, which when linked to the circumstances allow for a conclusion to be drawn based on those circumstances. The historian's intentions are, however, not yet true evidence either. Using the evidence, the historian produces hypotheses about historical events; however, they have to be compared with documentary evidence. The historian who makes up people, events, and situations and then presents them as real (historical facts), falsifies history and comes into conflict with scientific truth. The manuscripts *Kralovedvorský* and *Zelenohorský* are seen to have high artistic value but as historical documents they are counterfeits. T. G. Masaryk was right to underline that national tradition cannot be founded on lies and untruth.

G. Vico (1991, §§ 400-410) drew attention to the significance of emplotment in the work of historians some time ago. This led, however, to two different traditions. One of them builds on the discrimination between artistic and historical emplotment, while the second seeks to blur the distinction between them. According to H. White, historical consciousness should be analyzed through discourse as a certain literary genre. His "poetic logic" includes tropology and emplotment. White's tropology is an attempt to find linguistic equivalents for the basic stages in the development of historical consciousness. The transition from associative thought to conceptual thinking and then to thinking about thinking (to self-awareness) may be, according to him, expressed in the tropes of metonymy, synecdoche, irony. White conceives them as pre-cognitive and pre-critical linguistic universals. His emplotment of a historical story is borrowed from fiction. White's four types of emplotment are romance, satire, comedy, and tragedy. According to White, explanation by emplotment does not share the character of scientific explanation using historical "facts" but that of aesthetic and ethical interpretation and explanation by ideological implication, and, as such, it depends on the standpoints of historians. Explanation by ideological implication can thus take on the form of anarchism, conservatism, radicalism or liberalism. White argues that different styles of historical investigation are derived from different ways of integrating argumentation, emplotment, and explanation by ideological implication (White 2000, 98, 100, 177-178, Domanska 2000, 16-18, 20-24).

Hayden White is an adherent of liberal constructivism. In his preface to the Polish edition of his essays, he clearly distances himself from radical (ontological) constructionism. White states that he has never maintained that the past does not exist by itself, that truth about the past does not exist, that there is no difference between history and fiction and/or that everything is merely text (White 2000, 88). Originally, he shared Roland Barthes' view that facts are merely a "linguistic reality" and he deduced that historical facts are not "given" to us, that they have to be "created", that they are merely our constructions and are fictional in character. However, he then gradually clarified his standpoint. It is no longer simply "facts" but "statements about facts" that have the character of "linguistic structures" and thus also of our constructions. He underscored that we have to distinguish between "factual events" and our statements about those events. Along with this, he also clarified his understanding of emplotment. He refined his earlier statement that historical emplotment is "fictionalization" by stating that the term "fictionalization" should not be conceived as the creation of fictions but rather in terms of "figuralization", etc. (White 2000, 200, 237, 255, 266). On these questions, his standpoint gradually comes closer to critical realism but he still ignores the issue of the truth of historical narrative, and of comparing historical narrative with its referent. White sees the aesthetic, ethical, and ideological interpretation of historical facts, regarded by Danto as a mere extra-historical supplement to the factual truth of historical narrative, as its key characteristic.

F. R. Ankersmit's position is similar. He sees historical narratives not in terms of descriptions and scientific explanations of the past but merely as their metaphorical interpretations. He distinguishes between historical research as fact and historical writing as (hermeneutic) interpretation. Historical narratives are not revelations of the facts but projections of the past. Historical narratives do not correspond to the past. Historical statements may be true or untrue but the holistic narrative cannot be either true or untrue (Ankersmit 1994); for a critical analysis, see (Šuch 2009, Zeleňák 2008).

What is the situation regarding the truth of a historical narrative? The problem is that in order to verify the truth of historical narrative, comparison with the past is necessary. But the past is over and we cannot observe it, we cannot experiment with it, etc. Some authors use this fact to "confirm" their statement that historiography is not a science, that it is science of a "lower" rank. Such an argument does not hold water. Earlier Collingwood (1939/1986, 211, 215, 225, 296) emphasized that the past is not dead, that a historian can revitalize, reconstruct, reactivate, re-enact the past in his/her thinking on the basis of the critical analysis of testimonies from relics of the past and from documents.

The paradigm of "good" science cannot simply be identified with the method of immediate observation and experimental research. In practice, there are two different, equal, complementary ways of verifying scientific knowledge. One of them prevails in historical research, while the second is found in classical experimental research. The difference between them derives from the causal asymmetry between contemporary and past events, on the one hand, and contemporary and future events, on the other hand. Representatives of the historical and experimental sciences find themselves in different epistemological situations. Those who experiment are primarily engaged in evaluating repeatable generalizations; their research activities focus on the generation of predictions from individual (or complex) hypotheses and on testing by changing the conditions in laboratory experiments. Scientists concerned with the historical sciences focus on the assessment of hypotheses about past events; they cannot reproduce these events in laboratories, but they can look for existing remnants of past events, create competing hypotheses for their explanations and search for a hypothesis that would provide the best explanation (Cleland 2002, 480-481, Kleinhau et al. 2005, 309-314). For instance, Antonella Magagnini (2008) stated in her book about the Etruscans that such a large number of ancient vases were found in Etruscan necropolises that it enabled them to build some kind of chronological axis; this made them an important "tool for the reconstruction of historical events and arts and crafts not only of the Greek civilization but also of other cultures, which were developing simultaneously in the Mediterranean region (Magagnini 2008, 129).

G. Vico emphasized that the historical world was created by people and it can therefore be understood by people better than the world of nature. The world of the past as the subject of historiography is (or was) entirely independent of the contemporary researcher. This fact gives the historian a higher degree of objectivity than that afforded to those working in philosophy or other social sciences. History thus cannot do away with objectivity either; historical narratives are not only constructions but also reconstructions of the past. Even if we regarded history as the history of spirit, we could not justifiably maintain that narratives are mere constructions. The thinking of a historical character, which a historian reconstructs in his/her own way, ceases to be a subject in itself but it does not cease to be an object. It cannot be identified with the thinking of the historian who provides the narrative of it. The thinking of the historian and the thinking of the historical character being reconstructed by the former, are two facts of different persons in different times. The point is that the thinking is situated in a different period and in different economical, social, political and cultural conditions. A historian cannot change the thinking of

a historical character arbitrarily unless s/he wants to falsify history. S/he can only construe it as historical fact. To say that historical narrative cannot be objectively true does not mean to say that it cannot be knowledge of the past. R. G. Collingwood (1939/1986, 158, 287, 291-292, 307) realized all this some time ago.

The problem is that history is, like the other social sciences, a reflexive activity. We are in fact dealing with a society that thinks and writes about itself. The people who write about society live within society. This fact sheds doubt on the classical, objectivistic ideal of “objectivity”, which led to the subject being eliminated from scientific investigation. History cannot give up objectivity; it cannot grasp objectivity in terms of classical objectivism. Not least because in his/her narrative a historian does not deal with all the details (not even all those which he is aware of) but only with those of historical significance. A new theory of objectivity has to be developed, in which objectivity will be understood as the relationship between object and subject; at the same time, the statement of subjectivism that our past is merely a discourse about other discourses has to be rejected (Appleby 2002, 201-231).

Historical Narrative in Terms of Truth and Meaning

A historical narrative must first be distinguished from a fictional story. A fictional story can be meaningful, even if it is not true, whereas a historical story has to be meaningful, true and consistent with the well established historical facts. To give a true description of the historical events and personalities that have to be explained is, according to Danto, the minimal characteristic of the historian's activity and his/her primary duty. A historian has to try not only to give a true account of past events and personalities but also to find their historical significance. According to Danto, a historian wants his/her work to be useful and s/he is convinced that it cannot be useful if it is not true. He sees the usefulness of the historian's work (e.g. that of Thucydides) in the fact that in his narrative he characterizes typical human responses to typical situations occurring under particular conditions, and with an awareness of the fact that similar (although not identical) situations may also occur in the future. By analyzing typical situations and/or possible (apparent) human behaviour in such situations, the historian teaches his/her present and future readers how to act correctly and/or how to behave under similar conditions. The truth and the meaning of the historical narrative are subjected to different criteria. The verification of the truth of a historical narrative is subjected to the criterion of verification (confirmation) and relies on documentary evidence. The verification of the meaningfulness of a historical narrative observes the criterion of relevance and relies on conceptual evidence. The criterion of verification is necessary but not sufficient in evaluating the total value of a historical narrative. It should not be identified with the criterion of its meaningfulness (Danto 1968, 11, 20, 22, 25-26, 34-62, 112, 123, 127, 132, 134).

It is true that holistic historical narration may contain different kinds of linguistic expressions: statements which may be true or untrue; evaluative criteria that may have not only a cognitive component (subject to the criterion of truth), but also a non-cognitive component (subject to the criterion of relevance); hypothetical statements, of which the truth is yet to be resolved; idealizing statements relating directly only to idealized objects, counterfactual statements (if, then), which have no referent, etc.⁴ The overall quality of historical narrative is,

⁴ On the problem of disputes regarding the background of virtual (chaotic) history built on the basis of counterfactual statements, see Pomorski 1984.

however, determined by the system of true statements about the past and an adequate assessment of the meaning of historical events and personalities.

M. Standford is right to state that there are historians who are capable of depicting the drama of history in its full meaning, irony and pathos, and historians who scrupulously stick to the details in order to reach a greater truth. There are historians who were not only great historians but also great artists and there are a number of volumes of historical works which, in an effort to reach the truth, neglected the art of the narrative to such an extent that they became unreadable and boring. An adequate comprehension of history consists in combining both perspectives: truth and meaning. Objectivity itself should be understood not only in the empirical sense and/or in terms of the fact that historical discourse corresponds to objective reality, but also in the intersubjective sense, that is, in terms of the fact that the historical discourse is acceptable to any rational being (Stanford 1988, 56, 217).

According to Topolski and Pomorski, historiography is not just an “unveiling of the past”; it has to be conceived as our active ideological “reconstruction of the past” (Pomorski 1991, 199). Our ideological reconstruction of the past is never its complete revelation. We have got used to thinking that we can get to know the past exactly. But if information is getting lost in black holes, then it is not valid (see Hawking 2001, 123). The history of humankind and the evolution of the universe can serve as evidence.

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