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The reality effect in the writing of history; the dynamics of historiographical topology

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I. INTRODUCTION. THE 'NEW' VERSUS THE 'OLD' HISTORIOGRAPHY

Philosophy of history comprises three areas: historiography, speculative philosophy of history, and critical philosophy of history. Historiography describes the history of the writing of history itself through the ages. The speculative philosopher of history looks for patterns or rhythms in the historical process as a whole; one thinks of the speculative theories of history devised by Hegel, Marx, and Toynbee. Critical philosophy of history, finally, is a philosophical reflection on how historical judgements are formed.[1]

Since the second World War speculative philosophy of history has been an issue of debate in philosophy of history only to the extent that its purpose and feasibility have been consistently questioned. Speculative philosophy of history never recovered from the criticism leveled against it by Popper, Hayek, Mandelbaum, and many others and at present its standing is lower than ever.[2] In the post-war period, therefore, emphasis has come to lie on historiography and critical philosophy of history. The most striking and significant development in history of philosophy in recent years has been the strong rise of historiography at the expense of critical philosophy of history. Philosophical self-reflection on the writing of history no longer has the nature of a philosophical analysis dealing with the origin and reliability of historical judgements, but tends to be a reflection on the past history of historical writing and particularly on what was systematically concealed in it or even 'repressed' in the Freudian sense of the word. That shift of emphasis provides the occasion for this essay.

The growing interest in historiography, however, concerns a completely different kind of historiography from that of, roughly speaking, the period before the last decade. One can thus speak of a 'new' as opposed to an 'older' or traditional form of historiography; the distinction between the two lies in different views on the nature of historical reality, of historical texts, and of the relationship between both. Traditional historiography is based on what one might call a double transparency postulate. In the first place the historical text is considered to be 'transparent' with regard to the underlying historical reality, which the text in fact reveals for the first time. Next the historical text is seen as 'transparent' with regard to the historian's judgement of the relevant part of the past, or, in other words, with regard to the (historiographical) intentions with which the historian wrote the text. According to the first transparency postulate, the text offers us a view 'through the text'

[1] For a further explanation of this three-way division, see F.R. Ankersmit, *Denken over geschiedenis. Een overzicht van moderne geschiedfilosofische opvattingen*, Groningen 1986; 13-15.

[2] One thinks here of the so-called 'post-modernist' attack on all linear views of history current in the West since the Enlightenment. Paradigmatic in the rejection of such 'meta-narratives' is J.F. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, Paris 1979. A very clear discussion of the consequences for the writing of history is found in J. Rüsen, Historische Aufklärung im Angesicht der Post-Moderne: Geschichte im Zeitalter der 'neuen Unübersichtlichkeit' in Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Hrsgb., *Streitfall deutsche Geschichte*, Essen 1988.

of a past reality; according to the second, the text is the completely adequate vehicle for the historiographical views or intentions of the historian.

Important is first of all a curious 'double bind' relationship between these two transparency postulates: on the one hand they are at odds with each other and on the other hand they presuppose each other. They are at odds with each other because transparency of authorial intention destroys the unobstructed view of the past and vice versa. They presuppose each other (1) because transparency with regard to the past is needed to make the author's intention an identifiable entity (since this requires a constant, common background) and (2) because the transparency of a text with regard to the past is conditional on an authorial intention which 'lets the past itself speak'. The paradoxes of this double bind can be resolved only if a complete identification of the past reality of the past and the author's intention is made possible. From the point of view of the historical object – the past itself – Ranke created such a possibility by requiring the historian to 'erase' himself completely from his work in favour of the past itself.[3] And from the point of view of the knowing subject – the historian – Collingwood created it by means of his 're-enactment' procedure.[4]

Important in the second place is that both transparency postulates formed the matrix within which traditional historiography could develop. The first transparency postulate guarantees the presence of an unchanging backdrop against which the evolution in the representation of the past over the years can be observed. The second provides the traditional historiographer with an object, in the form of the author's intention, for his writing of history. For without this objectively given authorial intention (of which the text is the adequate vehicle) the historiographer has no guarantee that the evolution observed by him is more than a reflection of his own personal reading experience of various historical texts.

Both these transparency postulates of the old historiography are contested today. An increasing number of critics condemns the transparency postulate of authorial intention as an example of hermeneutical naivety. Both Anglo-Saxon and continental philosophers of history have debated this problem intensely and it can be maintained that all philosophical disputes about action, speech, intention, and interpretation are ultimately concerned with this matter. Hence there can be no question of discussing it in detail here, and I will confine myself to the following explication. One can distinguish between 1) the author's intention, 2) the text itself, and 3) the reading of the (e.g. historical) text. When the defenders of the transparency postulate in question focus all their attention on the link between 1) and 2), they are accused by their opponents of presenting the *reading* of the text as essentially non-problematic. The critics of the transparency postulate, on the other hand, con-

[3] L. Ranke, *Sämmtliche Werke Bd 15*, Leipzig 1870; 103.

[4] 'All history is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian's own mind.' See R.G. Collingwood, *The idea of history*, Oxford 1980, 215.

centrate on the reading of the text and in doing so create an interpretative haze which obscures our view of the author's intention once and for all. The link between 2) and 3) becomes the object of all interpretation and the author's intention disappears from view. Thus far a very brief outline of this complex matter.[5]

With the second transparency postulate things are, if possible, even more complicated. The reason for this is that historism – the philosophy of history which to this very day largely determines our thinking about the past – long succeeded in blocking our view of this postulate. We believed that historism, with its critique of the Enlightenment, had taught the historicity of all our thinking – including our thinking about the past. This seemed to rule out a 'historically untainted' view of the past, in which case the transparency postulate obviously stood condemned. One of the most important insights offered by Gadamer's *opus famosum*, however, was that this accepted account of the debate between historism and Enlightenment is fundamentally incorrect and that historism should not be regarded as a protest against but instead as a radicalization of the Enlightenment. Gadamer requires us above all to pay attention to the place of the knowing subject, i.e. the historian. Gadamer points out that historism excepted this knowing subject itself from its aim to historicize the world. Historism wanted to have the best of both worlds: against the Enlightenment it recognized the historical character of the world in which we live, but with the Enlightenment historism believed in the possibility of trans-historical knowledge of this world. And the net result was that historism by no means rejected the 'project of the Enlightenment' – clarification of the nature of social reality – but in fact addressed it with even more powerful, namely historical, instruments. Far from condemning the Enlightenment, historism was in fact its fulfilment.[6]

Gadamer reformulated this state of affairs in a useful and interesting way by observing that, at the crucial moment, historism remained faithful to the transcendentalist definition of the knowing subject current in Western philosophy since Descartes. In effect historism raised the knowing subject to an even more elevated position, towering high above all historical storms, than the Enlightenment had ever done. Historism's inclusion of itself in the transcendental tradition had two consequences. First, if there is a transcendental (historical) subject that guarantees reliable (historical) knowledge, this leads

[5] One of the most remarkable effects of this new approach to texts is that they are detached from their historical context: the interaction between text and its historical context is exchanged for the interaction between the text and the historian or the historiographer. For the first time since historism the historian is no longer required to place his object of study in its historical context. For a courageous and consistent defence of this unorthodox point of view, see D. LaCapra, Rethinking intellectual history, in id., *Rethinking intellectual history: texts, contexts, language*, Ithaca 1983.

[6] 'An dieser Einsicht gemessen, zeigt es sich, dass der Historismus, aller Kritik am Rationalismus und am Naturrechtsdenken zum Trotz, selber auf dem Boden der modernen Aufklärung steht und ihre Vorurteile undurchschaut teilt.' See H.G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen 1972; 254, 255.

to a fixation of the (historical) object or of the (historical) reality of which this knowledge is acquired. Reality reflects the knowledge we have of it. Epistemological fixation thus stimulates ontological fixation – in this case the notion of a past reality, constant and existing independently of the historian, which can be studied as an object. A second consequence is that the transparence of the historical text with regard to the past is made plausible. A historically uncontaminated, transcendental knowing subject looks 'through the text' at a past reality which lies behind it.

In this way the framework was created within which traditional historiography was possible. And at the same time we now have an indication of the way in which the new historiography, in contrast with its predecessor, formulates its objectives. For the new historiography the text must be central – it is no longer a layer which one looks *through* (either at a past reality or at the historian's authorial intention) but something which the historiographer must look *at*. In the new historiography this new postulate of the *non*-transparency of the historical text leads to a concentration on the conflicts, hesitations, ambiguities, ambivalences, in short, on what Paul de Man has styled the 'undecidabilities' of the (historical) text and in which the non-transparency of the text reveals itself. Psychoanalysis is an instructive model here. Just as psychoanalysis refuses to accept our self-explanations and our speaking about ourself, but plays it off against itself in order to show that it conceals an unsuspected mechanism, so the new historiography tries to show what lies hidden behind the apparently open self-presentation of the text. And that is not a reality independent of the text (the past, an intention, the autobiography of the historian, or the social or cultural context in which the historian carried out his work), but a textual mechanism: what was always 'repressed' within traditional historiography was the phenomenon of the *text* itself. Traditional historiography always remained blind to the opacity of the historical text and to the fact that historiographical insight ought to be wrested from the text's obscurities which constitute this opacity. Incidentally, the connection made here with psychoanalysis involves more than just a comparison: psychoanalytical methods and insights have often been adopted *in toto* by the new historiography.[7]

In a very simplified form I have sketched above the transition from the old to the new historiography. What has been gained by this evolution in historiography can hardly be overestimated. In the first place historiography has been stripped of transcendentalist presuppositions recently considered more and more unsuitable for a discipline like the writing of history.[8] From

[7] H. Kellner, Triangular anxieties: the present state of European intellectual history, in D. LaCapra & S.L. Kaplan eds., *Modern European intellectual history. Reappraisals and new perspectives*, Ithaca 1982. See also F.R. Ankersmit, Twee vormen van narrativisme, *Tijdschrift voor filosofie* 50 (1988); 40-82.

[8] That is the leitmotiv of the book by Gadamer mentioned in note 6. For the writing of history this rejection of epistemology is explained in F.R. Ankersmit, The dilemma of contemporary Anglo-Saxon philosophy of history, *History and theory Beiheft* 25 (1986); 1-28.

a more practical point of view the new historiography has enabled us to study historical texts in a new way, to pose new questions and thus gain surprising new insights. Anyone who has read Barthes on Michelet, White on Marx or Droysen, Kellner on Braudel, or Bann on Thierry and Barante, will always view those texts in a different light. The somewhat dusty genre of historiography has been turned into an exciting intellectual enterprise.

Nevertheless some new problems arise. If the new historiography blames its predecessor for putting itself in a position of transcendental isolation with regard to its object, it seems that this reproach can be leveled against the new historiography too. The new historiography often seems no more prepared to 'risk' itself historically than traditional historiography. Another problem is that the postulate of the non-transparency or opacity of the text means that sometimes too much attention gets paid to the moments where the historiographical text gets in its own way, where the rhetoric of the text conflicts with its argumentative surface. But even more important in the context of this discussion is the following. As a result of the increased emphasis in the new historiography on the text at the expense of the author's intention and the historical reality which the text claims to describe, it has become extremely difficult to ask whether the historical text represents past reality in an adequate way. For the new historiography tends to confine its view to the text: 'il n'y a pas de hors texte', to quote Derrida. In this way the limits of the text become the limits of the historical world. And this is not because the new historiography refuses to consider the historiographical problems surrounding the historical world, but rather because it prefers to see such problems as essentially textual or linguistic problems. Thus Braudel is praised in a brilliant essay by one of the major representatives of the new historiography, Hans Kellner, because in his *Méditerranée* he 'has expended a great deal of art and energy to create a linguistic solution for a linguistic problem'.[9] This courageous statement by Kellner is in fact a succinct recapitulation of the road followed by philosophy of history over the last ten years and gives us an inkling of the road lying ahead.

To conclude this introduction the starting-point of my argument can be formulated as follows. There is a traditional historiography which is based on a traditional definition (in philosophy of history) of the nature of historical reality, the historical text, and the relationship between both. The last ten years have seen the development of a new historiography which draws much of its inspiration from developments in literary criticism and theory. This strongly text-orientated historiography has marginalized the problem of the relationship between text and historical reality and hence the biotope of both traditional historiography and traditional critical philosophy of history. As the new historiography gains more and more ground, there is less point in repeating the traditional certainties of critical philosophy of history

[9] H. Kellner, Disorderly conduct: Braudel's Mediterranean satire, *History and Theory* 19 (1980) 222.

about the relationship between text and historical reality. By doing so critical philosophy of history would only succeed in isolating itself. Rather the critical philosopher of history might ask what is to be understood by historical reality if the way of thinking which underlies the new historiography is accepted. In what follows I wish to develop an approach to this question.

II. CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND HISTORICAL REALITY

The task of critical philosophy of history is to study historical method. It is therefore a part, or the counterpart in philosophy of history, of philosophy of science, which examines scientific method. The word 'method' is broadly interpreted here. I consider methodical questions not only to be questions about methodology in the strict sense of the word, but also questions about the epistemological or logical status and structure of scientific theories. The inclusion of critical philosophy of history in philosophy of science can certainly be disputed on good grounds, since this inclusion suggests that the writing of history is a science. Opinions differ here and this is in fact one of the main issues in critical philosophy of history.

Given the professional interest of philosophers of science in methods, it is surprising to see how little attention they pay to the method of philosophy of science itself.[10] One might object that every standpoint in philosophy of science is at the same time a view on what is essential in the process of acquiring scientific knowledge and thus involves a methodical recommendation for the philosopher of science to focus his attention on certain matters. In this way it can be argued that every standpoint in philosophy of science is at the same time a statement about the method which the philosopher of science should follow. The drawback of this argument is that it suggests that the debate on the method of philosophy of science can only be conducted with arguments derived from philosophy of science – and that would obviously condemn this debate to circularity.

Despite the silence maintained by philosophers of science on this point, something can still be said about their method. Philosophy of science is essentially a hermeneutic discipline where, as always in hermeneutics, *one* thing, in this case science, is understood in terms of *another* (of which more later). Its aim is to clarify what science is by projecting the scientific method

[10] An illustrative example is the introduction (excellent even by international standards) to philosophy of science written by A.A. Derksen, *Rationaliteit en wetenschap*, Assen 1980. The very first page of this book already thrusts us *in medias res*. An introductory discussion about 'the phenomenon of philosophy of science' is conspicuously absent. The suggestion, apparently, is that we have entered the sphere of pure Reason, which no longer needs to subject itself to methodical self-examination. An exception to the rule that philosophers of science are not interested in their own methods is B. Latour, *Science in action*, Stony Stratford 1987; see esp. pp. 258, 259. This equally amusing and revealing book is in fact a continual reflection on the method to be followed by the philosopher of science. Unlike Derksen Latour is particularly alive to the less rational aspects of scientific research (in his case biochemistry). This explains his more relaxed attitude to philosophy of science and his willingness to face methodical determination of it.

onto another plane – a procedure perhaps best characterized by the word 'mapping'. 'Mapping' is for instance the way in which part of the earth's surface is charted by means of projection, so that the distance and shortest route between two points can be determined. The philosopher of science does not offer explanations like the scientist, he does not carry out empirical research; he clarifies by referring to analogies.

Looking at the history of philosophy of science, we see that in the course of time two proposals were advanced regarding the planes on which science and scientific method were projected. For the inductivism of positivism and logical positivism, for Popper's falsification theory and for the many refinements of it by philosophers of science like Lakatos, Sneed, Stegmüller etc., logic was the plane on which the procedures of science are projected and in terms of which understanding of these procedures is sought. Now one might object that science does the same thing insofar as scientific language can be projected on the plane of mathematics, but that we cannot therefore talk about 'hermeneutics' in the intended sense. The difference, however, is that the mathematical language of the scientist is a language which speaks about a certain part of physical reality, whereas logic is for the philosopher of science a language in which he translates the language and procedures of the scientist (with the aim of testing their rationality). 'Translation' (with all the hermeneutic associations of that word) is opposed here to 'speaking about' (where these associations are lacking). With and after Thomas Kuhn, however, resistance grew to this logicistic hermeneutics of scientific research and since then science was rather projected onto the plane of history or sociology. Within the latter hermeneutic framework the business of science is seen as a process of socialization carried out by the scientific researcher within a certain disciplinary matrix. Science should not be described in a different way from the socio-cultural developments discussed by historians in their books and articles.

If this characterization of philosophy of science is basically correct, the following three comments can be added. From the perspective of philosophy of science the two planes of projection – logic and history or sociology – are not as different as might at first be supposed. I refer in this connection to Winch's analysis of human action, based on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. According to this analysis human action is a continual reflection of the logic which governs our linguistic and conceptual categories and therefore historians and sociologists should take this insight as the starting-point of their research.[11] Winch's theory raised the obvious objection that the boundaries between logic and sociology are thus eliminated: sociology becomes conceptual analysis. But this objection loses much of its force if, instead of an enquiry into the Azandes or a medieval knight, an enquiry into the actions of the scientific researcher is involved. Certainly the Kuhnian

[11] P. Winch, *The idea of a social science*, London 1971.

philosopher of science will find little reason to oppose a sociological analysis of scientific method and a sociological determination of scientific logic. But the logicistic philosopher of science, too, cannot argue that it is necessary to distinguish between logic of science and sociology of science without endangering his own enterprise. For any room created by making this distinction is created at the expense of logic of science. Either one considers both to be parallel – and in that case one opts for Winch's line of thought, or one rejects the parallelism of logic of science and sociology of science – in which case logicistic philosophy of science disqualifies itself as a logicistic utopia. It seems likely, therefore, that Winch's conceptions may prove of further use in defining scientific method more precisely.[12]

Secondly, in spite of their commensurability for philosophy of science, no two disciplines lie further apart than logic and history or sociology – I leave art and literature out of consideration. Logicians have never been able to cope with the writing of history and their attempts to do so have always been distrusted by historians.[13] If nonetheless these two disciplines, lying as far apart as possible, are the planes of projection on which scientific method is to be mapped, we can conclude that philosophy of science can never be revolutionized again in the manner achieved by Kuhn. For any such attempt will necessarily be an intermediate form of the existing extremes and therefore cannot be essentially new. Only an orientation towards art and literature could prove to be revolutionary in this sense.

This relative standstill which is to be expected in the theoretical debate invites a third comment. The method used within philosophy of science leads *sui generis* to an emphasis on the logical and the historical or sociological, that is to say on the *non*-realistic aspects of scientific research. These are obviously the aspects which are most easily transposed to the planes of logic and history or sociology. The hermeneutic method of philosophy of science is not neutral, therefore, since it grants a certain a priori plausibility to non-realistic interpretations of scientific enquiry. Hence philosophy of science has a permanent tendency to evolve in the direction of positions like the fictionalism or the conventionalism from the time of Duhem and Poincaré, the more recent instrumentalism, or of the constructive empiricism lately held by Van Fraassen.[14] What these standpoints have in common is the idea that scientific theories are not statements about physical reality, but tools which enable

[12] That the gap between both traditions of philosophy of science can apparently be bridged in practice is demonstrated in Derksen, *op. cit.*; 227.

[13] The tragi-comic history of the 'covering law model' testifies to the inability of logicians to say anything useful about the writing of history. The aprioristic historical speculations developed in the past by e.g. Kant and Hegel have taught the historian not to expect useful contributions from logicians.

[14] 'Science aims to give us theories which are empirically adequate: and acceptance of a theory involves as belief only that it is empirically adequate. This is the statement of the anti-realist position I advocate: I shall call it constructive empiricism.' See B. van Fraassen, *The scientific image*, Oxford 1987; 12.

us to generate reliable statements about reality: 'theories are intellectual tools, not physical ones. They are nevertheless conceptual frameworks deliberately devised for effectively directing empirical enquiry and for exhibiting connections between matters of observation that would otherwise be regarded as irrelevant.'[15] Of course this instrumentalism leads realists to ask how scientific theories derive their ability to guide us through an external reality which is independent of us. As a result the theoretical debate inevitably resembles an ellipse, with instrumentalism and realism as its two foci. And we must at all times remember here that this debate in philosophy of science largely originates in a theoretical position stimulated by the *method* of philosophy of science, and *not*, therefore, in the realities of scientific research.

Although the value of the debate between constructivism and realism is beyond question, the relative predictability of the main issue imposes limitations. We are led to consider alternative theoretical approaches. After what went before one candidate in particular presents itself. We just observed that realism offers a natural counterbalance to the viewpoints stimulated by the method of philosophy of science. A philosophy of science that concentrates on the nature of scientifically examined reality therefore follows naturally from existing discussions. And going further one concludes that such a philosophy of science will not, given the proper orientation of philosophy of science, be an ontological reflection on this reality, but an enquiry into the nature of this reality as it presents itself in the context of scientific research. In other words, this philosophy of science will not focus on scientific method but on the nature of reality as it is constituted by scientific research and under acceptance of the results of this research.

Moreover, if we agree to define the task of philosophy of science in this way, we can connect up with an earlier proposal. I am thinking of A.G.M. van Melsen's so-called 'natural philosophy'. It is true that Van Melsen first of all presented natural philosophy as being equivalent to scientific research itself, in the sense that both study the same object, physical reality.[16] But gradually – and certainly when discussing the theory of relativity and quantum theory – Van Melsen's natural philosophy moved in the direction of a philosophical reflection on the *results* of scientific research, i.e. on physical reality as it is constituted within natural science. And although his position remained ambiguous, Van Melsen was prepared to recognize the usefulness of such a 'combination of natural philosophy and natural science'.[17] It may be that Van Melsen did not present his ideas convincingly, or perhaps natural science (Van Melsen's preferred field) is not the most suitable discipline for working out such a philosophy of science, or perhaps there was something flat and stale about his views on natural philosophy, so that they appealed to neither scientists nor philosophers – in any case that fact remains that Van

[15] E. Nagel, *The structure of science*, London 1971; 130, 131.
[16] A.G.M. van Melsen, *Natuurfilosofie*, Amsterdam 1955; see e.g. 13, 28.
[17] Van Melsen, *op. cit.*; this is the theme of chapter VII.

Melsen's natural philosophy has found little response. In itself, however, this involves a challenge rather than a condemnation of a science of philosophy orientated to the results of scientific research rather than to scientific method. Given the extent to which we are today inclined to view reality from the perspective of science, it is actually surprising that philosophy of science has always been so preoccupied with methodical matters and not with the kind of questions suggested here.

This section started with the observation that critical philosophy of history is a part of philosophy of science. After the foregoing we can conclude that there is scope and even need for a critical philosophy of history which uses recent developments in the writing of history to draw conclusions about the nature of historical reality. In the previous section we saw that the reality of the past is propounded as a major problem by the new historiography – and this should be taken all the more seriously, seeing that the new historiography is the most vital branch of present-day philosophy of history. From this point of view, too, critical philosophy of history has a task.

III. EARLIER VIEWS ON THE REALITY OF THE PAST

One could fill an encyclopedia of philosophy with the meanings attributed to the word realism through the centuries. A distinction drawn by Carnap is useful to start with: 'we have to distinguish between two concepts of reality, one occurring in empirical statements and the other occurring in the philosophical statements just mentioned'.[18] On the one hand there are empirical statements as 'when a zoologist asserts the reality of kangaroos', on the other hand there are the realistic, idealistic, or solipsistic views which philosophers express about the nature of reality. This second kind of statement is considered meaningless by Carnap: a statement 'has sense only if it concerns elements or parts, not if it concerns the system itself' (i.e. the world as such).[19] Carnap recognizes no middle between statements about parts of the world and about the world as such. Now the interesting and also exceptional thing about the writing of history is that it usually involves the adoption of just such an intermediate position. Although the historian makes statements about empirical matters in the past, these statements are always part of a historical text. And the historian conceives this text in such a way that it can be considered to offer a representation, if not of the whole 'system' of the world, then at least of a greater part than Carnap thinks permissible.[20] There can be no doubt that Carnap's dichotomy leaves us helpless when we are confronted with the problem of a historical text about e.g. Hellenism.

[18] R. Carnap, The rejection of metaphysics, in M. Weitz, *20th century philosophy: the analytic tradition*, New York 1966; 211.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] Unlike the vocabulary of description and explanation and that of hermeneutic interpretation, the vocabulary of representation does not suggest a restriction to parts of the historical text. See F.R. Ankersmit, Historical representation, *History and Theory* 27 (1988); 205-229.

The historical text, as Walsh already observed,[21] lies halfway between the empirical statement and metaphysics. And our question must thus be whether there is a past reality that corresponds to the historical text so far as it exceeds the sum of its individual statements and, if so, what the nature of this reality is. Naturally one can contest the legitimacy of this question by arguing that the text is no more than the sum of its individual statements. This reductionist view is taken by Kuzminski when he says that 'we can often if not always check our narratives [i.e. historical texts] against past events [as described in the text's individual statements]'.[22] The transition from statement to text is made here by regarding the truth of the text as a truth function of the text's statements. This leads to the following problem: we tend to regard a text consisting of true but irrelevant statements as 'less true' than a relevant text which contains some factual errors. If one wishes to maintain Kuzminski's reductionism in the face of this objection, one is caught in a casuistic jungle with no way out.[23]

Although the reality of the past is sometimes dealt with in discussions about the truth of historical statements and texts, or about historical interpretation and narrativity, the theme is on the whole a neglected one.[24] Only for a few philosophers of history from the first half of this century like Croce and Collingwood did the problem have any degree of urgency. The reason for this is that these philosophers of history held an idealistic view of historical knowledge while at the same time they were as keen as their realistic opponents to maintain the reality of a past reality existing independently of us. The manner in which Croce defended the reality of the past in the context of his 'radical historism' is, however, extremely contrived. Like Hegel Croce held that 'the Spirit' makes history. And this process entails that as the Spirit unfolds itself in the course of the historical process (but without a specific goal as in Hegel), the reality of the past changes as well. For instance, it could not be known in the nineteenth century that that the reality of the eighteenth century would contribute not only to the characteristics peculiar to the nineteenth century itself, but also to those of the twentieth century. The twentieth century had not been experienced and therefore the relevant part of the reality of the eighteenth century had not yet revealed itself. 'On the one hand the reality of the past changes as the spirit grows; on the other hand, there is only the present historian to bring the past to life, on the basis

[21] W.H. Walsh, *Metaphysics*, London 1963; 172 ff.

[22] A. Kuzminski, Defending historical realism, *History and Theory* 18 (1978); 344.

[23] F.R. Ankersmit, *Narrative logic. A semantic analysis of the historian's language*, The Hague 1983; 62 ff.

[24] Since it was founded in 1960, the most authoritative international journal of philosophy of history *History and Theory* has devoted only four articles to realism. The only article in which realism is considered from the perspective of historical representation (see note 20) and not from that of separate statements about the past is the article by C. Behan McCullagh discussed below. Curiously enough, P. Ricoeur's pamphlet, *The reality of the past*, Milwaukee 1984, deals with a completely different subject from the one indicated by the title.

of some present concern, which is itself part of the present that reality has now become.'[25] In short, the reality of the past changes with the evolution of history and the thinking about it – thus Croce attempts to soften the conflict between realism and idealism. One may doubt whether he succeeded. What was normally called idealism he simply calls realism, and this kind of manoeuvre hardly contributes to a solution of the problem. If Croce approached the problem of the reality of the past *a parte objecti*, Collingwood opted for a strategy *a parte subjecti*, to use his own terminology. Collingwood's re-enactment procedure requires the historian to repeat the past, i.e. the ideas thought by agents who lived in the past, in his own mind. In this procedure past thought is thus transferred to the present and thereby loses its quality of pastness. Hence the past is no more problematic for Collingwood than the reality of the objects we perceive around us. The difficulty here, however, is that the re-enactment procedure transfers only the time*less* idea to the present and not an act of thinking which *is* situated in the past.[26] Collingwood too, therefore, has no satisfactory answer to the question of the reality of the past.

In the first decades after the second World War the question receded into the background. Theory focused almost exclusively on historical method – this resulted in critical philosophy of history as it existed until recently. Both philosophers of history and historians took it more or less for granted that the past was an object (of study) – a very complex object – that was certainly different but not essentially so from the more trivial objects contained in our world. And if the theme of the past's reality was discussed at all, it soon merged into the theme of historical truth.[27] This tendency is also present in so-called constructivism, the only school in post-war philosophy of history to hold explicit views on the reality of the past. The theory of constructivism was already set out in the thirties by Michael Oakeshott,[28] but has recently found a devoted though far from flexible advocate in Leon Goldstein.[29] By means of a verificationist argument the reality of the past is not so much denied by Goldstein as deprived of its practical significance for the writing of history. The historian 'constructs' his image of the past on the basis of his documentary material – hence the term constructivism – but such images can only be compared *among themselves*. There can be no question of a comparison with the reality of the past *itself*: 'what we come to test our claims to historical knowledge against is never the real past (...) to which realists say our accounts refer; we have no access to that past. There is, in other words, no way to determine whether the historian reasoned truly in the real-

[25] D.D. Roberts, *Benedetto Croce and the uses of historicism*, London 1987; 149.
[26] For this objection see F.R. Ankersmit, *Denken over geschiedenis. Een overzicht van moderne geschiedfilosofische opvattingen*, Groningen 1986; 79-81.
[27] On this see Kuzminski, *op. cit.* en H. Gilliam, The dialectics of realism and idealism in modern historiographic theory, *History and Theory* 15 (1976); 231.
[28] M. Oakeshott, *Experience and its modes*, Cambridge 1978; 92 ff.
[29] L.J. Goldstein, *Historical knowing*, Austin 1976.

ist's sense.'[30] But Goldstein is just as reluctant to do away with the reality of the past as the realist whom he criticizes, for the passage continues: 'it is hard to doubt that there was a real past – or to formulate such a doubt in intelligible language – but I cannot see what role we are to find for it in the practice of history'.[31]

These older approaches to the problem of the reality of the past have two shortcomings. First of all their point of departure lies in separate statements rather than the text – Croce is possibly an exception here. This reductionist attitude towards the text leads to the problems mentioned at the beginning of this section. A second shortcoming more material to my argument is that the reality of the past is regarded as problematic *not* against the background of the writing of history itself and its results, but against the background of a reality felt to be non-problematic – in particular of the objects we find around us. In other words, the starting-point is a certain view of reality, and if next the writing of history cannot be fitted into this view, some other way around the problem is found. Instead of being the measure of things, the writing of history itself is measured here; for the question is not what the reality of the past must be taken to mean in view of the practice of history. A quite different approach emerges from the two essays which Roland Barthes devoted to the reality of the past – and these provide the starting-point for the rest of this argument.[32]

IV. THE REALITY EFFECT IN THE WRITING OF HISTORY ACCORDING TO ROLAND BARTHES

Roland Barthes (1915-1980) is counted among the most important French philosophers of the post-war period. His field of investigation is theory of literature rather than philosophy. But both in France and in the United States the distinction between literary theory and philosophy (of language) is becoming blurred. This is justifiable inasmuch as literary language is the most complex and interesting kind of language we know and thus pre-eminently deserves the attention of the linguistic philosopher. A philosophy of language that confines itself to the most elementary forms of language not only succumbs to the dogma that complex forms can be deduced from elementary ones, but also obstructs its view of a number of problems which it wishes to study. In this connection Danto has pointed out that 'literature sets up obstacles to the passage of semantical theories [especially with reference to fictive entities] which would would go a good deal more easily if literature did not exist'.[33] Barthes is often grouped with the structuralists,[34] but he does not

[30] L.J. Goldstein, History and the primacy of knowing, *History and Theory. Beiheft* 16 (1977); 33.
[31] Goldstein, *History*; 33-34.
[32] R. Barthes, Le discours de l'histoire, in id., *Le bruissement de la langue*, Paris 1984; R. Barthes, L'effet de réel, in id., *Le bruissement de la langue*, Paris 1984.
[33] A.C. Danto, *The philosophical disenfranchisement of art*, New York 1986; 142.
[34] See for instance J. Sturrock, Roland Barthes, in id., *Structuralism and since*, Oxford 1979.

seem particularly interested in general statements about the structure of language. Both the essays discussed below are even described by Barthes as anti-structuralist.[35] Barthes's lack of interest in general statements requires an important qualification, however. For it is his persistent concern is to show that the text is the vehicle of a morality, ideology, or view of reality unsuspected by writer and reader alike – in short, of what Barthes likes to call, rather dramatically, 'mythology'. Indeed, the rhetorical aim of the text is to present that mythology as a quasi-natural phenomenon. But the text is the creator of this quasi-natural reality rather than its ideological reflection – here Barthes differs from Marxism.

The central idea in both essays is that the reality of the past must be linked to a so-called reality effect, an 'effet de réel' which is created by irrelevant details mentioned in the historical text.[36] The reality of the past is an *effect* caused by a tension in and between historical texts. Barthes shows how in one of his novels Flaubert describes the room of his main character and mentions a pyramid of boxes and cases standing under a barometer. These kinds of details are called 'notations' by Barthes; he contrasts them with the main outline of the story, which he labels 'predictive', probably because on this level we can make certain predictions about the development of the story. Using Michelet's reference to certain details in the execution of Charlotte Corday, Barthes points out that a similar tension between prediction and notation can be demonstrated in the writing of history.[37] He goes on to develop a highly novel theory about these notations. First of all, and contrary to what we would expect, they are said to embody the highest degree of perfection which language can attain. This is already indicated by the fact that animals do have something reminiscent of predictive language – for instance, bees have 'un système prédictif de danses (pour rassembler leur nourriture)'[38] – but the animal world has no equivalent of the linguistic noise or static to which the word notation refers. Only human beings can chat. More importantly, the history of rhetoric and literature confirms this idea. It was not until the Alexandrian rhetoric of the second century AD – about a thousand years after Homer's epics – that the literary tradition of 'ekphrasis' and 'hypotyposis' arose. Ekphrasis and hypotyposis were rhetorical compositions describing ways of life, periods, and places (read: historical themes) as elegantly as possible and purely for the sake of description itself. The description, that is to say, did not form a link in some or other com-

[35] Barthes, *L'effet*; 167.

[36] One would not wish to exaggerate the originality of Barthes's insights. A comparable point of view is found as early as the twenties in an article by R. Jakobson, On realism in art, in L. Matejka and K. Pomorska eds., *Readings in Russian poetics: formalist and structuralist views*, Cambridge (Ma) 1971; 38-46. Essential elements are also found in nineteenth-century novelists like Flaubert, Baudelaire, or Vogüé and even in eighteenth-century critics and literary theorists. See I. Watt, *The rise of the novel*, Reading 1957; esp. chapter 1.

[37] Barthes, *L'effet*; 167.

[38] Barthes, *L'effet*; 169.

prehensive, 'predictive' argument. We are dealing here with an early form of notation and we see how it deliberately breaks away from predictive language for the first time.[39]

Barthes is concerned with what this means for the writing of history. We associate the reality of the past, he says, with notation rather than with prediction. The predictive is for us a *meaning* conceived or created by the historian; in notation, ekphrasis or hypotyposis, on the other hand, the past reveals itself as it really was. 'La représentation pure et simple du réel, la relation nue de 'ce qui est' (ou a été) apparaît ainsi comme une résistance au sens'.[40] Unlike what is expressed by notation, meaning is *constructed* and therefore cannot achieve the effect of reality. But we need to consider here that notation is only capable of doing so by its contrast with prediction and meaning.[41] The origin of notation lies there, after all, and not in an extra-textual relationship between a description in the text and a state of affairs in the past. This being so one wonders whether one should speak of a reality illusion rather than a reality effect.

That brings us to the heart of the matter. Is the reality suggested by the opposition of notation and prediction reality or mere illusion? In the Fregean theory of signs with its strict distinction between language and reality it must be called an illusion. Now a peculiarity of the Saussurian theory of signs generally adhered to by French philosophers is that it does not differentiate between language and reality as far as the reference of the sign is concerned. This puts a different complexion on the matter. Thus Barthes can write: 'dans un premier temps (...) le référent est détaché du discours, il lui devient extérieur, fondateur il est censé le [i.e. the discourse] règler: c'est le temps des *res gestae*, et le discours se donne simplement pour *historia rerum gestarum* [this is Frege], mais dans un second temps, c'est le signifié lui-même qui est repoussé, confondu dans le référent, le référent entre en rapport direct avec le signifiant [and this is Saussure]'.[42] The obvious thing to do in this kind of situation would be to compare the Fregean and Saussurian theories of signs and judge Barthes's suggestions on that basis. But that is precisely the route I decided to avoid in this argument: instead of measuring the writing of history from a predetermined philosophical standpoint, my aim is to arrive at a philosophical standpoint (here concerning the conflict between Frege and Saussure) based on evidence from the writing of history. Existing

[39] C. Ginzburg, Ekphrasis and quotation, *Tijdschrift voor filosofie* 50 (1988); 3-20.

[40] Barthes, *L'effet*; 172. See also Barthes, *Discours*; 165: 'en d'autres termes, dans l'histoire 'objective', le 'réel' n'est jamais qu'un signifié informulé, abrité derrière la toute-puissance apparente du référent. Cette situation définit ce que l'on pourrait appeler *l'effet de réel*'. Also important here is Barthes's later distinction between 'studium' and 'punctum'. See R. Barthes, *La chambre claire. Note sur la photographie*, Paris 1981; 49.

[41] In a similar context Ehrenzweig speaks of the 'uncompromising democracy' which governs the relationship of the important and the unimportant. See A. Ehrenzweig, *The hidden order of art*, London 1973; 43.

[42] Barthes, *Discours*; 164.

views on sign, reality, and reference are the object of this enquiry, not its point of departure.[43]

As often with novel theories, Barthes's argument perhaps raises more questions than it answers. I do not have the pretension of being able to draw up an exhaustive list of these problems – let alone solve them. I shall therefore confine myself to the three questions which seem to me most important. First, is the connection between the writing of history and the (nineteenth-century) realistic novel suggested by Barthes valid and useful? For in his view both achieve the reality effect. This leads to a second question. Can the historical text be credited with the ability to bring about a reality effect in the way indicated by Barthes? Thirdly – and this concerns Barthes's most spectacular claim – does Barthes establish a credible link between the reality effect and the opposition of notation and meaning?

V. HISTORICAL WRITING AND THE REALISTIC NOVEL

The preface which Zola later added to *Thérèse Raquin* contains the following passage: 'mon but a été scientifique (...). Tant que j'ai écrit Thérèse Raquin, j'ai oublié le monde, je me suis perdu dans la copie exacte et minutieuse de la vie, me donnant tout entier à l'analyse du mécanisme humain'.[44] Thus he summarized in a few words the aim of the realistic novel. The theory and practice of the realistic novel has been explained in more detail by literary theorists like Grant, Kohl, Hamon, Demetz, and many others. On the basis of their work the realistic novel can be characterized as follows: copious information about various periods, regions, and social strata, emphasis on the unexpected, the contingent, and the factual ('chosisme'), referentiality, man is a product of his heredity and the historical and social environment (Taine!), emphasis on the typical rather than the exceptional, encyclopedic, extremely well-documented, informative, a painful awareness of the writer's subjectivity, a judicious rationing of facts, sceptical, an even-paced, non-dramatic plot, a dry and direct, transparent style, a 'hurried' prose that has no patience with superfluous matter, didactic.[45] Would any

[43] F.R. Ankersmit, Twee vormen van narrativisme, *Tijdschrift voor filosofie* 50 (1988); 74-75.

[44] E. Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*, n.p. n.d. (Livre de poche); 8-9.

[45] See D. Grant, *Realism*, London 1970; passim; P. Demetz, Zur Definition des Realismus, *Literatur und Kritik* 16/17 (1967); 336, 338, 340, 341, 342; P. Hamon, Un discours contraint, *Poétique* 16; 413, 415, 417, 418, 423, 428, 432, 438; S. Kohl, *Realismus: Theorie und Geschichte*, Munich 1977; 190, 204; M. Schipper, *Realisme. De illusie van werkelijkheid in de literatuur*, Assen 1979; see esp. chapters I and V. When Hayden White writes that 'realist representation' should be regarded as '*the* problem of modern historiography', he too takes the term 'realism' in a literary-theoretical sense. See H. White, *Metahistory. The historical imagination in nineteenth century Europe*, Baltimore 1973; 3, see also 46 ff. But, as White goes on to say in reference to Auerbach and Gombrich: 'they ask, what are the 'historical' components of a 'realistic' art? I ask: what are the 'artistic' elements of a 'realistic' art?' I only follow him partly in this, however. My aim is in fact to show the affinity of these 'historical' and 'artistic' elements from the point of view of realism.

historian be ashamed of having several or even all of these qualifications applied to his writing? The mentality of the realistic novel and of the writing of history – as Hayden White has repeatedly pointed out – is the same.

But from the point of view of the reality effect there nevertheless seems to be an important difference between the two. For does not the 'reality effect' of historical writing reside in the truth of the individual statements which it makes about the past? The notations of the historical argument are true and this does not apply to the novel, nor even to the realistic novel. In the first place, however, the truth of the historical argument's individual statements is not a suitable criterion for distinguishing historical writing from the (realistic, historical) novel.[46] More importantly, Barthes situates the reality effect in the text itself, so that the truth of the statements made in the historical text is irrelevant in this connection. It can be countered, however, that within the domain of the text the annotation of the historical text preserves a reference to this truth-speaking about the past. And although it has been said of the realistic novel that 'its formal conventions force it to supply its own footnotes',[47] the fact remains that annotation of a novelistic text is highly unusual. Yet annotation is not a proper criterion for distinguishing between the reality effect in the realistic novel and the writing of history either. For a great deal of historical writing, like the realistic novel, is unannotated and annotation does not turn a text into a work of history.[48] Thus there are no really obvious objections to Barthes's equation of the reality effect in the realistic novel and the writing of history. Against the background of the mentality shared by both, therefore, it is fair to give Barthes the benefit of the doubt for the meantime.

VI. HISTORICAL WRITING AND REALISM

This brings us to Barthes's second claim, according to which the historical text has the ability, within certain limits, to create a past reality. This view cuts across the traditional realistic view of the past. The latter view has re-

[46] Ankersmit, *Narrative logic*; 19-27; id., De chiastische verhouding tussen literatuur en geschiedenis, *Spektator* 16-2 (1987); 91-106.

[47] I. Watt, *The rise of the novel*, Harmondsworth 1957; 33.

[48] Jean d'Ormesson's *'A la gloire de l'Empire'* is a fictitious history of Europe since the death of Charlemagne. Georges Duby describes his experience of reading this book as follows: 'Diese durchweg imaginäre 'Geschichte' präsentierte sich flankiert von einem kompletten kritischen Apparat, den der Berufshistoriker ja, um die Wahrhaftigkeit seiner Informationen zu bestätigen und um glaubhaft zu versichern, dass er sich auf 'wahre Tatsachen' stützt, glaubt mitliefern zu müssen. Alles war da: die Kunstgriffe der Rhetorik der Geschichtsschreibung, verständnisinniges Zuzwinkern an die Adresse der Kollegen, eine Bibliographie und Fussnoten, die auf manchmal erfundene, manchmal wirklich existierende Arbeiten verweisen; ich hatte dabei den Eindruck einer Profanierung, einer Übertretung, des Unreinen, ein gefühl des Ekels.' See G. Duby and G. Lardreau, *Geschichte und Geschichtswissenschaft*, Frankfurt am Main 1982; 45. Duby's sense of disgust at this 'transgression' can only be explained by the evident proximity to historical writing of Ormesson's book. And that proves to what extent the 'reality effect' in historical writing depends on the series of rhetorical devices referred to by Duby.

cently been restated by the Australian philosopher of history Behan McCullagh. Our insight into Barthes's position can be increased by contrasting it with that of McCullagh. McCullagh's crucial assumption is that there is a past reality which is as much a datum as the things we find around us in everyday life. This past reality is made up of various components, such as actions, events, historical processes, which may be the object of historical enquiry. Since humanism and above all since the beginning of the last century, philologists and historians have developed a number of codes and rules to which the study of these objects must comply if one is to arrive at what McCullagh calls a 'fair representation of the past'.[49]

In effect Barthes turns this around. In his view we do not have these historical codes and rules – and we need not think only of the textual rules to which the historical text must comply – in order to *investigate* a given historical reality, but to *bring about* an 'effect de réel', that is, to *constitute* a historical reality. It is not true that the historian first has recourse to a generally recognizable historical object like the French revolution or the birth of the nation-state, which he then tries to describe as accurately as possible by continually comparing the historical original with his historical description of it. This realistic view of how a 'fair representation' of the past is reached is naive, since the very question asked in history and the historical debate is what should be *regarded as* the French revolution or the birth of the nation-state.

This should not be misunderstood. There is no suggestion here that the rules and codes which the historian uses are misleading, unreliable, or arbitrary. On the contrary, philology, statistics, the rules for an acceptable historical argument – these often enable us to answer a certain kind of question in a correct and reliable and comprehensible way. The point is that these rules and codes also suggest this special kind of question and thus unconsciously and unintentionally construct the historical object and the reality of the past. They do not analyze a previously given historical reality, but define it first. 'Historical reality' is not a datum but a *convention* created by the reality effect. And now it becomes easier for us to understand the long series of attempts, since the days of Ranke, to discipline the practice of history – 'discipline' here in both senses of the word. Only through the rules and codes which discipline the historian and his work can a stabilization of the historical object be reached and only then is collective historical enquiry and historical debate possible. In short, despite appearances, through the reality effect the meaning of the historical rules and codes lies in their fixation of the historical object rather than in their investigation of it. And in fact the realist, naive or otherwise, has every reason to be grateful to the reality effect: it makes the world conform to the way he prefers to see it.

But no doubt some sense of alarm will still be left among naive realists after this and so I shall briefly return to McCullagh and his realistic ideal

[49] C. Behan McCullagh, The truth of historical narratives, *History and Theory Beiheft* 26 (1987); 30-47.

of a 'fair representation of the past'. McCullagh compares the historian with a portrait painter: both pursue a correct representation of a part of reality and both try to achieve that goal by comparing the original and its representation.[50] Further on I shall follow McCullagh in this analogy, but I must point out that it operates in McCullagh's favour, since the historical object is never presented to the historian as clearly as the model to the portrait-painter. But even with this handicap the weakness of McCullagh's realism can be demonstrated. It is true that both the historian and portrait-painter prior to, say, 1900 aimed at a 'realistic' interpretation of the world. The astonishing fact, however, is that this attempt at realistic representation in both history and art gave rise to such a wide diversity of styles. This fact, of course, inspired Gombrich's *Art and illusion* and his criticism of the 'myth of the innocent eye' – criticism apparently wasted on McCullagh.[51]

This brings us to the question: what is essentially a 'realistic' representation of the world, as we call it? In recent years few people have given as much thought to this problem as Nelson Goodman. First of all, says Goodman, we tend to agree with the naive realist that a realistic representation must bear a close resemblance to the original. But this cannot be the answer. Rembrandt's portrait of Jan Six is more similar to, for instance, Cézanne's self-portrait than to Jan Six, even if Rembrandt has painted an extremely good likeness. It is simply a fact that a piece of painted canvas is more like another piece of painted canvas than a human being made of flesh and blood, regardless of how both canvases have been painted. Nor is it enough to say with Gombrich that a realistic work of art must create an illusion of the world. We never confuse even the most successful 'trompe l'oeil' painting with the world itself. We can add the following note. There is an interesting series of paintings by Magritte in which various 'trompe l'oeil' are depicted in their environment (for instance 'La condition humaine' from 1933). Under these circumstances the 'trompe l'oeil' proves fully capable of achieving its intended effect; here the gap between world and representation is at once stated and destroyed. One could consider these paintings imaginative depictions of naive realism. And the paradox is that one can paint but not actually accomplish what the naive realist aims at.

Like verisimilitude or the creation of an illusion, supplying a maximum of information is no condition for a realistic interpretation: a working plan of a building or a ship provides more information than a realistic depiction, but is not one itself. But, as Goodman continues: 'here, I think, lies the touch-

[50] McCullagh, *Truth*; 34 ff. This comparison of the historian with the portraitist is a well-known topos in philosophy of history. Shaftesbury already wrote: 'the mere Face-Painter, indeed, has little in common with the Poet; but, like the mere Historian, copies what he sees, and minutely traces every feature, and oddmark'; cited in Watts, *Rise of novel*; 17. For McCullagh's naive realism see also his *Justifying historical descriptions*, Cambridge 1985; chapter I.

[51] 'Whenever we receive a visual impression, we react by docketing it, filing it, grouping it one way or another, even if the impression is only that of an inkblot or a fingerprint. (...) The innocent eye is a myth.' See E.H. Gombrich, *Art and illusion*, London 1977; 251.

stone of realism: not in the quantity of information but in how easily it issues. And this depends on how stereotyped the mode of information is, upon how commonplace the labels and their uses have become. Realism is relative, determined by the system of representative standards given for a given culture or person at a given time.'[52] In other words, realism is based on a stereotyping of representative codes; and it is these codes which guarantee the 'effet de réel' of realism. The similarity to Barthes's views is evident.

This similarity was also noticed by M. Brinker in an essay in which he attacked Goodman's ideas about realism.[53] Brinker distinguishes between 'seeing' and 'representation': because we 'see' the world, we entertain certain notions about it and by these notions we judge the realism of realistic representations. And he concludes that naive realism, which holds that some representations come closer than others to what the world is really like, cannot be dismissed out of hand.[54] But Goodman rejects the distinction proposed by Brinker: 'seeing is as relative to symbol systems, to conceptual schemes, as variable with habit and convention, as is representation. The innocent eye is a myth long dead. And beliefs, far from standing as independent criteria for judging representations, are themselves versions.'[55] So that when Brinker says that some representations come closer to reality than others we have to ask: 'whose reality?' There seems to be a reality for each representative code, but no ultimate or most fundamental reality which underlies all views of reality. And this is in fact the position Goodman adopts in his suggestively entitled book *Ways of worldmaking*: 'if I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say?'.[56] Now regardless of how far this statement is valid for art and science – Goodman's preferred fields of reference – for the writing of history it goes to the heart of the matter. The writing of history has no frame of reference which underlies all historical representations. It is true that such a frame was long sought after. The result is found in speculative systems like those of Marx and Hegel. In the writing of history naive realism and speculative systems are, curiously enough, two sides of the same coin. Barthes and Goodman, on the other hand, give us a historical reality which agrees with the sceptical spirit and critical sense of modern history.

VII. THE PROBLEM OF THE FRAME

Barthes's third claim is his most striking but also most debatable one. An immediate possible objection is that it cancels itself. For if the opposition be-

[52] N. Goodman, *Languages of art*, Indianapolis 1976; 36-37; see also p. 39: 'that a picture looks like nature often means only that it looks the way nature is usually painted'.
[53] M. Brinker, Verismilitude, conventions, and beliefs, *New literary history* 14 (1983); 261 ff.
[54] Brinker, *ibid.*; 265.
[55] N. Goodman, *Of mind and other matters*, Cambridge (Ma) 1984; 128.
[56] N. Goodman, *Ways of worldmaking*, Hassocks 1978; 2-3.

tween notation and prediction, between 'what is' or 'what is shown' and meaning creates the reality effect referred to by Barthes, then notation or what is shown in the text acquires a meaning too – so that the distinction between notation and meaning disappears. Barthes might argue, however, that this does not eliminate what *precedes* the assignment of meaning to notation. For the rest the status of Barthes's theory remains unclear. Is it a generalization about realistic novels and historical studies? Is it concerned with the psychological and rhetorical effect of texts on the reader which are constructed in a certain way? Or is it both these things? Barthes's article does not answer these questions and in the following discussion of the textual space in which the opposition between notation and meaning occurs I shall therefore avoid a commitment to any one approach. As in the previous section, my method will be to map the the writing of history on the visual arts. In doing so I shall distinguish between the formal aspects of the textual or pictural space and the content of this space, starting with the former.

Meyer Schapiro has pointed out that a traditional painting contains a number of non-mimetic components, components which have no counterpart in the world itself. In the first place one can think of the rectangular form of most paintings, which naturally corresponds to no part of what is represented. Prehistoric mural paintings do not have this non-mimetic element; the painting is not yet isolated from the space around it. In the first millennium before Christ paintings are given a frame or the equivalent of one and thus enclose their own space;[57] only then are effects, reality effects one would almost say, like depth and the distinction between foreground and background possible. An intermediate form occurs in older Chinese and Japanese art, where the suggested rather than painted sky or foreground does not belong to the painting and is therefore freely inscribed with texts – which do not, of course, belong to the space of the painting. But, generally speaking, the picture frame is a highly potent generator of pictorial meaning. Schapiro's semiotics of the work of art is obviously best illustrated by landscape painting and that explains perhaps why artists have never made sculptures of landscapes. A sculpture has no frame and shares the same space with the spectator. In sum, the merit of Schapiro's article is that it points to the 'several ways in which the ground and the frame, conceived as a non-mimetic field for the elements of imagery, affect their meaning and in particular their expressive sense'.[58] Similar perceptions are found in Derrida.[59]

[57] M. Schapiro, On some problems in the semiotics of visual art; field and vehicle in image-signs, *Semiotica* 1 (1969); 224-225.

[58] Schapiro, *op. cit.*; 241.

[59] What Derrida used to denote (especially in *De la grammatologie*) by the term 'supplement' appears as the so-called 'parergon' in J. Derrida, *La vérité en peinture*, Paris 1978. The parergon of the work of art is usually the frame around it. 'Autre trait commun, l'encadrement peut aussi, en tant que *parergon* (addition extérieure à la représentation), participer, ajouter à la satisfaction du goût pur' (111). And: 'le parergon (cadre, vêtement, colonne) peut augmenter le plaisir du goût (*Wohlgefallen des Geschmacks*), attribuer à la représentation propre et intrinsèquement esthétique s'il intervient par sa forme (*durch seine Form*) et seulement par sa forme' (74).

Proceeding from here we can add a new dimension to our insight into the writing of history. The idea of the frame provides the key. The frame delimits the space of the work of art and the spectator. In painting the transition from one space to the other is usually quite abrupt, although the figures that move out of the frame in some Baroque frescos show that this need not be the case. In the writing of history there must be an analogue of the frame: for like a painting a historical text represents a part of the world within a space defined by the representation. True enough, the 'frame' of a historical text is much harder to identify than that of a painting and this is probably why theorists and historians were never aware of its presence. We prefer to concentrate on the 'representation' in a historical text and are apt to neglect the semantic space which permitted the representation in the first place. We regard a historical text in more or less the same way that paintings were made in China and Japan before 1850, and a great deal of historical interpretation does in fact have the character of a writing in the semantic space of previous historical representations. In contrast to those paintings, nevertheless, the historical text must have a frame. For if we can say on the basis of the conclusions reached in the previous section that we know the reality of the past only in and through representations of the past and if, furthermore, the assumption of a difference between the reality of the past and the present is a condition for all historical writing, then all historical writing must in fact be enclosed by such a frame. The very fact that we are inclined to forget the frame, for all that it indicates the boundary between past and present, demonstrates the necessity of introducing it as a concept. Historiographers and philosophers of history can therefore learn from Foucault's insistence on what remains unsaid in a text and how the text is nonetheless embedded in this tacit frame.[60]

Now we can maintain, by analogy with Schapiro's discussion of paintings, that the frame of a historical text makes an essential contribution to its meaning. In other words, it largely determines our idea of the reality of the past. It goes without saying, further, that historians wish to penetrate more deeply into the reality of the past than an earlier generation of historians. Combining these two facts, we can conclude that the evolution of historical writing is at least partly stimulated by a constant attempt to grow or expand in its framework. To put it irreverently, revolutionary historical writing is like the putti in Baroque frescos. The development of historical writing is therefore marked by – among many other things – the undoing of older representative strategies. And what a newer kind of history announces as a deeper penetration into the reality of the past is often actually the reverse, namely a step taken from the space of the past in the direction of the space of the reader, i.e. of the present.

All this sounds highly abstract and speculative; the question is what we should take the framework of historical writing to be in concrete terms. But

[60] M. Foucault, What is an author, in id., *Language, counter-memory, practice*, Ithaca 1986; 113-139.

that question is surprisingly easy to answer. The 'frame' is the transition between past and present, marking as it does the boundary between both, and it therefore consists of what is not subjected to historical scrutiny. That is to say that it consists of what is felt to be quasi-natural in any given phase of historical enquiry. It seems an obvious step to associate this quasi-natural frame with Barthes's notations, since these are the foreground or background against which the meaning of the historical text and thus of the past's reality is created, although they themselves are not involved in that meaning. The attempt of historical writing to grow in its framework thus amounts to an attempt to historize spheres of quasi-natural notations which are increasingly proximate to us. And that is exactly what the history of written history shows, starting with the theological conception of history, via economic and social history, up to and including present-day mentality history – more about this later. Thanks to Barthes and Schapiro, therefore, we gain an insight into the mechanism which determines the evolution of the writing of history. We can add that the effect of reality (in the writing of history) is not something static; the effect becomes visible only within the dynamics of the expanding framework. This removes an obvious objection to Goodman's theory of realism, which by emphasizing the conventional nature of realism seems to leave little scope for explaining the phenomenon of change in art. But there is no problem here if the reality effect is both conventional and subject to a dynamics of its own.[61]

VIII. THE PULL OF THE FRAME

This dynamics takes us from the formal aspects of Barthes's theory to its content. The point of departure here is again the art of painting – in particular landscape painting. My concern will be with the discovery of the landscape as a generally accepted subject – or content – for the work of art.

Pietro Aretino tells us that he learned to see the beauty of the Venetian twilight only through the paintings of Titian. Similar remarks about landscapes are found in Ruskin, Nietzsche, and Wilde.[62] Such statements do not involve a *recognition*, as if the painter made us aware for the first time of a landscape which we had always been seeing. Nor is it a matter of seeing the same thing through different eyes, as in Jastrow-Wittgenstein's famous *Gestalt*. There is an *investment* in the new way of seeing which excludes the optional aspect of the *Gestalt*. Through the loss of this optional aspect it is as if the world chooses a world view rather than vice versa. There is no longer place for the traditional dichotomy between what is (realistically) seen and the (idealistic) interpretation plus all the consequent philosophical strategies. More than anything else one is reminded of what Freud indicated by the technical term 'cathexis' – and that too is a concept which loses everything

[61] Brinker formulated this objection. See Brinker, *op. cit.*; 258.

[62] E.H. Gombrich, The Renaissance theory of art and the rise of landscape, in id., *Norm and form*, Oxford 1985; 117. L.B. Cebik, *Fictional narrative and truth*, Lanham 1984; 200.

by being interpreted in either a realistic or an idealistic sense.[63] Hence, aesthetic discovery, the discovery of the landscape, cuts across most, if not all the dichotomies that were proposed in traditional epistemology. This may partially explain why aesthetic discovery is such a suitable point of departure for dealing with the otherwise intractable problem of the dynamics of historiographical topology.

Gombrich summarizes the usual view of the origin of the landscape as follows: 'we hear how the naturalistic landscape backgrounds of fifteenth century paintings swallow up the foreground, as it were, in the sixteenth century till the point is reached with specialists such as Joachim Patinier, whom Dürer calls 'the good landscape painter', when the religious or mythological subject dwindles to a mere 'pretext''.[64] In short, there was a movement away from the mythological or religious centre of meaning to the foreground or background and the result was the naturalistic or realistic landscape. Gombrich subscribes to the 'substantial accuracy' of this standard view,[65] but goes on to emphasize the revolutionary nature, as he sees it, of the landscape as a genre. This revolutionary nature consists in the fact that the movement away from the religious and the mythological is not induced by the pull of a *new* centre of meaning, but is rather a movement in the direction of what has hitherto been without meaning – here the landscape differs from the still life, which refers back to an existing system of symbols.[66] For this very reason landscapes initially lacked prestige. They were referred to as 'parerga', minor works, and were related to Pyreicus, the 'rhyparographer', the classical painter of filth and trivia. Quite characteristic are the contemptuous words which Francesco da Hollanda puts in the mouth of Michelangelo: 'in Flanders they paint with a view to extol exactness of such things as may cheer you and of which you cannot speak ill... They paint stuffs, masonry, the green grass of the fields, the shadow of trees and rivers and bridges which they call landscapes' and Michelangelo makes it quite clear that he prefers by far the traditional religious and mythological centres of meaning.[67] Some qualification is called for here. Clark and Gombrich already pointed to landscapes which originated in existing topoi like the change of the seasons. Sometimes the greatness of God was discerned in the very details of nature:

[63] See J. Laplanche, J.B. Pontalis, *The language of psychoanalysis*, London 1973; 62. 'Besetzung' or cathexis is defined there as follows: 'economic concept: the fact that a certain amount of psychical energy is attached to an idea or to a group of ideas, to a part of the body, to an object etc.'. Psychic reality comes about here through an act of
investing, in which the boundary between what is invested in (realistic) and the investing itself (idealistic) can no longer be usefully drawn.

[64] Gombrich, *Landscape*; 108.

[65] *Ibid.*

[66] In particular the kind of symbols as codified in emblematics since Alciati.

[67] Gombrich, *Landscape*; 114. See also P.C. Sutton, Introduction in id., *Masters of 17th-century Dutch landscape painting*, Boston 1987; 8, see also 4.

'ex minimis patet Deus'.[68] And Bruyn has recently shown how usefully an iconographic approach can also be applied to seventeenth-century Dutch landscape painting.[69]

The origin of the landscape is a metaphor for the evolution of historical writing. This evolution is not an increasingly deeper penetration into a given historical object (as is perhaps the case in physical science), but a continuing process in which a former centre of meaning gives way to what seemed meaningless and irrelevant under the earlier dispensation. And as Origen was convinced of the truth of the Gospel precisely by the triviality and barbarity of the Greek in which it was written, so historians believe that they can grasp truth and reality by mobilizing the irrelevant and the trivial. Let us briefly consider the themes studied in the past two centuries. Starting-point is the religious view of history developed by Augustine and still accepted in the seventeenth century by Bossuet. 'Weltgeschichte' (world history) and 'Heilsgeschehen' (salvation history), in Löwith's words, were still identical here. In the Enlightenment, with its belief in progress, salvation history was secularized and became the triumphant march of human Reason through history. It was Hegel who provided a majestic philosophical foundation for this idea of progress. Closer still to the 'notations' of human existence stood the national history of Ranke and German historism. A new layer of 'notations' previously thought irrelevant was tapped in the social and economic history propagated by Marx and the socialists of the chair. And via legal history, institutional history, the history of geography and climate (Braudel and Le Roy Ladurie) we finally reach the history of mentalities of the past ten to twenty years, in which the joys and sorrows of everyday life, great and small, acquire a historical dimension.

This journey past newer and newer categories of notations is a movement *toward* us, much like the way an actor on stage moves past the various wings in the direction of the audience. This movement of history is therefore not an ever-deeper penetration into the historical object in the sense that every new layer of notations which is tapped explains the previous one. Intellectual history does not explain religious history, economic history – as even Marx himself admitted – does not explain intellectual history and the history of geography and climate, the history of mentalities and the history of gender do not explain economic history or political history. And could the landscape explain the religious or mythological representation? Nor is this movement a progressive conquest of the objectivity of the historical object in its pristine purity. For there is no permanent historical subject; it undergoes a continual metamorphosis within the opposition between notation and meaning. One therefore agrees with Mink, if for different reasons, when he writes that the problem of the ethical and political subjectivity of the historian is an outdat-

[68] Gombrich, *Landscape*; 108; K. Clark, *Landscape painting*, New York 1950; 12; P.C. Sutton, *op. cit.*; 13.

[69] J. Bruyn, Toward a scriptural reading of seventeenth-century landscape paintings, in P.C. Sutton, *Masters of 17th-century landscape painting*, Boston 1987; 84-104.

ed one. Moreover, the area of tension between notation and meaning has moved beyond the sphere of ethics and politics.[70]

Against this background we can comment shortly on current approaches to history. The so-called 'covering law model', according to which general laws determine the way that historians describe and explain the past, does not accord with the picture sketched above. The reality of the past lacks the stability of nature, to which the same laws can always be applied. Something similar is true of attempts to reconstruct the historical object by an act of empathy, as proposed by Collingwood and the 'philosophy of action' school.[71] Narrativism falls short on a different count. According to the narrativist the historian projects a unity and coherence onto the past which the past itself does not possess – and here lies the advance on the two approaches just mentioned. The historian does this by telling a story, a narration, about the past. But narrativism is a theory about individual historical texts and not about the evolving practice of history. Perhaps German hermeneutics, Gadamer's in particular, comes closest to the above account. It too emphasizes ontology at the expense of methodology and unlike narrativism it too is aware of how the historical object is constituted only in the evolving practice of history. One should recall here Gadamer's notion of 'Wirkungsgeschichte'. But there is no important role here for the meaningless static of notation. These critical remarks do not mean that there is no room for the approaches mentioned. On the contrary, the 'covering law model', hermeneutics, and narrativism offer useful and meaningful characterizations of a *synchronic* cross-section of historical enquiry. But if we consider the *diachronic* development of historical enquiry, we are confronted with a mechanism which cannot be resolved into one or more of these approaches, a mechanism which sometimes, indeed, seems opposed to them.

IX. HISTORY OF MENTALITIES

Certain developments in twentieth-century art afford a deeper insight into the evolution of historical writing outlined in the previous section. These developments have been discussed by Arthur Danto in a series of articles and books described by Alexander Nehamas as 'the most suggestive and exciting project of the philosophy of art in recent years'.[72] Danto's starting-point is the question preliminary to all aesthetics: what is art? Prior to 1900 this was

[70] 'It is no longer so much a question of the social and political interests from whose vantage-point history is written as it is of the professional interests which require historians to find new subjects and new methods by which they can make the transition from being consumers to being producers of historiography.' See L.O. Mink, *Historical understanding*, Ithaca 1987; 91.

[71] For a review of this tradition and its significance for the practice of history, see F.R. Ankersmit, De Angelsaksische hermeneutiek en de geschiedbeoefening, in Th. de Boer ed., *Hermeneutiek. Filosofische grondslagen van mens-en cultuurwetenschappen*, Meppel 1988; 121-151.

[72] A. Nehamas, review of A.C. Danto, The philosophical disenfranchisement of art and of id., The state of the art, *The journal of philosophy* 85 (1988); 214.

not a truly interesting question. Art as a rule aimed at being a mimetic representation of the world. That ideal could not be realized and both facts made the identification of the work of art a simple matter.[73] But the problem of what art is has become unexpectedly urgent in our century with the appearance of works of art which have the peculiar property of being indistinguishable from the objects that surround us in everyday life. Examples are Duchamp's 'ready-mades', the most famous and provocative being the urinal titled 'Fountain' from 1917, the Brillo boxes put on exhibition by Warhol in the sixties, and Jasper John's paintings of flags which cannot be distinguished from real flags. These are not 'trompe l'oeil' works, since the latter may be very suggestive representations of the world, but are nonetheless representations. By contrast, the kind of objects Danto has in mind aim at overstepping the boundary between world and representation. With Tilghman one can deny that this kind of object is a work of art, but such a position is dogmatic.[74] The more so because Danto succeeds in showing that objects of this kind form a logical conclusion to the development of the visual arts since the Renaissance. During this period art obeyed the imperative of replacing, as best it could, an illusion or suggestion of reality by an equivalent of the appearance which phenomenal reality itself presented.[75] In the 'ready-mades' and the Brillo boxes this development assumes its most dramatic form; for here there are no longer physical, objective differences between the work of art and the world or parts of it.[76] Precisely because there is no longer any difference between representation and what is represented, the question of what makes a representation a representation now becomes extremely urgent. Danto's own reading of this revolution is that the art we are so familiar with has come to an end and has become a *thinking* about art (about the nature of representation).[77] The Hegelianism in this account of the matter is evident and is in fact warmly embraced by Danto. But if we formulate the problem of what art is in this way, that is to say as a question of how we distinguish between a urinal and Duchamp's 'Fountain', then the answer is obvious. There can only be a *difference in interpretation.* 'It will have been observed that indiscernible objects become quite different and distinct works of art by dint of distinct and different interpretation, so I shall think of interpretations as functions which transform material objects into works of art. Interpretation is an effect, a lever with which an object is lifted out of the real world and into the art world.'[78] One can still ask *why* a material

[73] Strikingly enough, Danto resolutely rejects beauty as a constitutive quality of art. See A.C. Danto, *The philosophical disenfranchisement of art*, New York 1986; 12-13. The meaning of art takes the earlier place of the beauty of art.

[74] B.R. Tilghman, *But is it art?*, Oxford 1984; 98.

[75] Danto, *Disenfranchisement*; 88.

[76] Danto, *Disenfranchisement*; chapter 2; id., *The transfiguration of the commonplace*, Cambridge 1983; chapter 4.

[77] Danto, *Disenfranchisement*; 107ff; id., *Transfiguration*; 208.

[78] Danto, *Disenfranchisement*; 39.

object is interpreted as a work of art in this way. Danto does not explicitly answer this question, but his theory about what went before these ambivalent objects is sufficient answer. The development of art pushes in the direction of the interpretation of the 'ready-mades' as works of art. Consequently, of course, a great deal comes to depend on the plausibility of Danto's theory about this development.

If we do in fact interpret the objects as works of art, we are faced by a dilemma, as Danto observes. Duchamp's 'ready-mades', for instance, can be equally regarded as an absorption of the world by art and as a movement in which art is absorbed by the world. 'It is comical how little difference it seems to make whether art is an airy nothing revealing reality in its nakedness, or so gluts itself with reality that between reality and itself there is no real difference.'[79] Danto's view of the evolution of art in our century results not only in a blurring of the distinction between art and reality, but even in what one could call a interflowing of both.

This has an equivalent in the relationship between past and present in the writing of history. Just as the boundary between art and world is blurred in modern art, so the boundary between past and reality gets blurred in the most recent evolutions in historical writing. Unlike recent times, the historical object today often has an elusiveness and transparency which makes demarcation of the boundary between past and present problematic. The writing of history shows a tendency to grow in the framework which separates the reality of the past from that of the present. The most striking evidence of this is provided by the genre of 'micro-histories'. This genre in present-day historical writing is employed by historians like Carlo Ginzburg (who coined the term), Nathalie Zemon-Davis, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. Its subject-matter is invariably a small and insignificant event from the past. In Ginzburg we are given the history of a miller at the end of the sixteenth century whose unorthodox views attract the attention of the Inquisition; Zemon-Davis tells the story of a clever impostor who for a number of years manages convincingly to take the place of a vanished husband.[80] Now the curious thing about these 'micro-histories' is that they are not only silent about the major events of the time in which they are set, but even seem to lack the hallmark of their period. Both 'micro-histories' could have taken place in exactly the same way many centuries earlier or later. The historical 'meaning', to use Barthes's terminology, has disappeared and everything has become notation. The sum effect of the 'micro-histories' is therefore a contemporization of the past or, in view of Danto's dilemma, a historization of the present. Zemon-Davis also drew attention to this when responding to one of her critics. In connection with her book about the pseudo-husband she writes: 'in historical writing, where does reconstruction stop and invention begin, is precisely the question I hoped readers would ask and reflect

[79] Danto, *Disenfranchisement*; 26-27.
[80] N. Zemon Davis, *The return of Martin Guerre*, Cambridge (Ma) 1983.

on, the analogy with the uncertain boundary between self-fashioning and lying built into my narrative'.[81] The writing of history seems indeed to have reached a stage where the boundary between reconstruction (of the past) and invention (in the present) is overstepped and the contours of the historical object are dissolved. Following Danto's suggestions we must regard 'micro-histories' as veiled statements about the nature of historical representation rather than as books in which significant information is presented about, in both cases here, the sixteenth century. These books are not about the past, but about the boundary between the past and the historical representation of it.[82] They form a curious mixture of theory and history.

To a certain extent the history of mentalities and the history of gender offer a different picture. Yet they show the same peculiarities, if to a lesser degree, and since the history of mentalities currently commands more interest than 'micro-histories', I want to devote a final short discussion to it.[83] The history of mentalities is a genre, developed and practised mainly by French historians, which focuses on the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of men and women who lived in the past. It is a history of attitudes, of behaviour, of collective, mostly unconscious ideas; it is a history of the child, the mother, the family, love, sexuality, and death.[84] At first sight one might simply conclude that historians have discovered a number of interesting new research topics. But in a certain respect this existential kind of history breaks with usual historical practice;[85] for like the 'micro-histories' it too is bent on marginalizing the historicity of the past. This is also hinted at by Vovelle when he contrasts the concepts of mentality and ideology. The Marxist concept of ideology is of course pre-eminently suitable for relating man's thoughts and feelings in the past to the overall pattern, that is to the meaning of history. But there is a layer in the world of thinking, feeling, and experiencing which cannot be understood in ideological terms – Vovelle mentions some examples.[86] This 'notational' layer constitutes the domain of the history of mentalities. Vovelle accordingly describes a mentality as 'un souvenir, une forme vide';[87] he talks about 'des formes de résistances', about 'la

[81] N. Zemon Davis, On the lame, *The American historical review* 93 (1988); 572.

[82] F.R. Ankersmit, *Twee vormen van narrativisme*; 72.

[83] The 'micro-histories' are usually included in the field of mentality history.

[84] Vovelle, one of the most prominent practitioners of the history of mentalities, defines it as 'une histoire des attitudes, des comportements et des représentations
collectives inconscientes: c'est bien ce qui s'inscrit massivement dans la vogue des nouveaux centres d'intérêt, l'enfant, la mère, l'amour et la sexualité ... la mort'. See M. Vovelle, *Idéologies et mentalités*, Paris 1982; 10.

[85] I deliberately use the word 'existential'; Mink has pointed out how little affinity phenomenology and existentialism show with the practice of history as we know it, even when they talk about the historicity of man. Historical writing normally leaves the sphere of human existence. Mink makes an exception for Merleau-Ponty. See L.O. Mink, *Historical understanding*, Ithaca 1987; chapter 5.

[86] Vovelle, *Idéologies*; 8.

[87] *Ibid.*

force d'inertie des structures mentales', and even more importantly about 'ce qui reste apparemment 'insignifiant', comme ce qui demeure très enfoui au niveau des motivations inconscientes'.[88] There is a striking similarity to Barthes's contrast between meaning and notation in the way that Vovelle describes the history of mentalities, in its orientation to human existence, as a décor against which the historical process stands out without being an exponent of it. Barthes too sees an opposition between existential environment and that which has meaning: the concreteness of the existential environment 'est toujours armé comme une machine de guerre contre le sens, comme si, par une exclusion de droit, ce qui vit ne pouvait signifier – et réciproquement'.[89] Thus the history of mentalities, in its opposition to ideology, exchanges the traditional sphere of 'meaning' for that of 'notation'.[90]

In the history of mentalities we see the disappearance of various barriers that keep past and present separate in other parts of history. This is to be expected in view of the pre-eminence given to notation above prediction and meaning. We can explain this as follows. In the past two centuries historians created a series of more or less complicated intellectual constructions, in the form of notions like 'people', 'state', 'nation', 'social class', 'social structure', 'intellectual movement', which could come to embody the distance between past and present. In terms of these and other notions the past was constantly analyzed in its quality of being different from the present. The fact that we always talk about the history of a certain people, of a certain nation, social class etc., which undoubtedly suggests a continuity between past and present, makes us forget that the past was divorced from the present precisely under cover of such notions. These notions have rendered invaluable services to the historian and it is unthinkable that they should be discarded. They enable us to give a meaning to the past and determine our own place in the historical process.

Nevertheless the history of mentalities and the history of gender have given rise to a form of history which is indifferent and perhaps even hostile to notions of this kind. For where notation takes precedence over meaning

[88] Vovelle, *Idéologies*; 13.

[89] Barthes, *L'effet*; 172.

[90] The history of gender, which is best regarded as a part of the history of mentalities, provides the best illustration of this inverse movement. Precisely because the history of gender offers insights into the past which involve a certain commitment for us, unlike for instance a history of death, the movement from meaning to notation stands out in all its essential sharpness. Prior to the history of gender, as various people have pointed out, women were usually regarded as belonging to the sphere of what is stable, unchanging, natural: in a word, to nature. 'Die Frauen sind hier begrifflich in der Sphäre der Stabilität angesiedelt, in der Sphäre dessen was als 'natürlich' und folglich unveränderlich in den menschlichen Beziehungen erscheint.' G. Pomata, Die Geschichte der Frauen zwischen Anthropologie und Biologie, *Feministische Studien Heft* 2 (1983); 113-127; see esp. 114; U. Wesel, *Der Mythos vom Matriarchat*, Frankfurt 1980; 122 ff. In the history of gender this quasi-natural 'meaning' is converted into notations in the Barthian sense. History thus recovers lost ground from the social sciences and this provides an indication how the border conflicts between history and the social sciences can best be settled.

these notions can no longer be accommodated. The recognition of meaning in notation is a contradiction in terms. In the history of mentalities and specifically the history of gender the boundary between present and past is therefore blurred. In the history of mentalities we are concerned with our medieval or modern ancestors in a way that differs little from our relationship with a peculiar neighbour or colleague. The protective shell of the historical disappears. When reading a study in the history of mentalities – and that applies *a fortiori* to the 'micro-histories' of Ginzburg and Zemon-Davis – we are struck by the unusual directness with which the past manifests itself. And this also perhaps explains the popularity of this kind of history with a large audience of non-historians.

X. CONCLUSION

We can now sum up. According to Barthes the reality of the past is an effect created by the historical text. That is the essence of the matter. Barthes's standpoint sounds anti-realistic, since it leaves no margin for a historical reality existing outside the historical text. It certainly must be interpreted as anti-realistic on the basis of a Fregean theory about the relation between sign and referent. There the referent is part of reality exterior to text and sign. As we saw in the discussion of Barthes, Saussure leaves room for a textual definition of referent and reality. Now the interesting thing about Barthes's theory is that it does in fact project the reality of the past as an external reality in spite of its textual origin.[91] For this theory is at least partly capable of explaining the evolution of historical enquiry, how the discovery of new, hitherto unsuspected objects of historical enquiry takes place, and so it undoubtedly goes beyond an idealistic or constructivist view of historical reality. There the past is our idea of the past and lacks the objectivity which it has in Barthes. The practice of history and Barthes thus force us to give up the Fregean theory of the relation between sign and referent, at any rate when we are talking about reference and reality in the practice of history.

Next we tried with the help of Barthes and Goodman to determine the content of the notion of past reality. Historical reality is created where existing representative strategies in history generate an opposition between meaning and notation. One cannot infer from this that the most recent form in which the opposition occurs – and in our time one might think of the history of mentalities – is also the highest form of historical enquiry. That would certainly be at odds with the practice of history, where forms of history developed in the past survive without difficulty beside more recent forms.

[91] The realist in the Barthian sense can probably reconcile himself with a definition of realism given by Putnam: 'a realist (with respect to a given theory or discourse) holds that 1) the sentences of that theory are true or false; and 2) that what makes them true or false is something external – that is to say, it is not (in general) our sense data, actual or potential, or the structure of our minds, or our language, etc.'; quoted in B.C. van Fraassen, *The scientific image*, Oxford 1980; 8.

In itself this fact appears hard to reconcile with Barthes's ideas, at least so far as they suggest that all older forms of history must be assigned to the realm of meaning. But for various reasons that suggestion need not be followed. First of all, why should a more recent reality effect necessarily undo an earlier reality effect? Secondly, and in connection with the foregoing, because there is no explicative relation between historical objects of enquiry, it is quite conceivable that the various forms of history can exist side by side in relative isolation. And thirdly, again in connection with the foregoing, since the dynamics implied by Barthes leads from meaning to notation (and not vice versa), this kind of relative isolation is in fact to be expected. How can the meaningful be explained in terms of meaningless notation? So it is reasonable to see the reality effect as a trail through history rather than as always the most recent route on that trail.

We can even go a step further and allow that an earlier route on the trail is sometimes to be preferred. This is best illustrated with reference to politics. Nineteenth-century novelists like Flaubert and Huysmans and critics like Emile de Vogüé were well aware that literary realism also embodied a political programme: that of democracy. And in fact a definition of social reality – and realism aimed at such a definition – cannot be politically indifferent. All politics takes place within a consensus on that definition. In accordance with the intuitions of the above authors, one might call the representative democracy which developed in the nineteenth and twentieth century the politics of realism. For representative democracy always set itself the aim of offering a clear and undistorted view of the objective political reality (i.e. the electorate); but as in the practice of history this political reality was only generated in and through representation.[92] And even more importantly this politics of realism in fact displays the same dynamics as the reality effect in historical research. Here too we have a movement which starts with a fixation on the forming of the nation-state, and then moves down, via the legal and political system of the constitutional state and via the organization of the national economy, to the trivial details in the existence of John Citizen. This parallelism between politics and historical enquiry need no longer surprise us now. However, it can be argued that the late nineteenth-century state was more successful in sharply defining its objectives and arriving at a balanced consideration of ends and means than the state today. By saying this I do not intend to praise an earlier definition of the political or historical reality above later definitions, but only to show that the point can at least be usefully discussed and that what comes last is not necessarily best.

Contrary to usage in the recent past, my argument has compared the writing of history not with science but with realism in literature and the visual arts. It never follows from such comparisons that the writing of history *is* in

[92] F.R. Ankersmit, Politieke representatie. Betoog over de esthetische staat, *Bijdragen en mededelingen voor de geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 102 (1987); 374; id., In search of the political object: Stoic and aesthetic political philosophy (in press).

fact a science or an art form. The seductive appeal of that kind of non sequitur derives from the tendency to turn the observed parallels into foundations of the writing of history. Thus ten to twenty years ago many people regarded the parallels between science and history (the existence of which no one doubts) as the basis on which the truth and reliability of historical knowledge could be established. In the attempt to do so the parallels in question changed from *signs* into *proofs* of the scientific nature of historical enquiry. One sees the same thing when Croce says that history is an art form. After the objections against epistemology raised by Rorty and many others, such attempts to found disciplines on the basis of philosophy of science have lost much of the plausibility which they had since Descartes and, above all, Kant.[93] It is folly to think that a venerable discipline like history needs to be founded in this sense at all and it is even more foolish to entrust the task to philosophers. Not just the best but the only convincing argument in favour of or against historical viewpoints is a historical argument and not a philosophical one. In science or historical enquiry we see epistemology and philosophy of science in action.

The results and the development of scientific or historical research may, however, give the philosopher food for thought. Not so as to to arrive at a Kantian 'critique of knowledge', but in order to see how science and history can complicate our commonsense notions about truth, knowledge, and reality. The question here is not whether and how the historian arrives at historical knowledge about a past reality, but what meaning we can assign to the concepts of truth and reality on the basis of what the practice of history shows. Here philosophy is not the foundation of history, but history is the foundation of philosophy. For the writing of history and for philosophy of history this kind of demarcation can be an improvement, since only too often they have stood in each other's way.

[93] I have explained the significance of Rorty's insights for philosophy of history in F.R. Ankersmit, The dilemma of contemporary Anglo-Saxon philosophy of history, *History and Theory Beiheft* 25 (1986); 1-28.