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Varieties of Historical Representation

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Article abstract

This paper sketches the evolution of thinking about historiography from its focus on method and the history of historical thought some fifty years ago to Mark Salber Phillips's highly original study, *On Historical Distance*, with its focus on "literariness" and its reconception of the meaning of "distance." The paper notes the approaches of historian J.H. Hexter, literary critic Ralph Cohen, and philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer as benchmarks along the way.

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Abstract

*This paper sketches the evolution of thinking about historiography from its focus on method and the history of historical thought some fifty years ago to Mark Salber Phillips's highly original study, *On Historical Distance*, with its focus on "literariness" and its reconception of the meaning of "distance." The paper notes the approaches of historian J.H. Hexter, literary critic Ralph Cohen, and philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer as benchmarks along the way.*

Résumé

*Le présent article retrace l'évolution de la pensée au sujet de l'historiographie, depuis l'accent placé sur la méthode et l'histoire de la pensée historique il y a une cinquantaine d'années jusqu'à l'étude très originale de Mark Salber Phillips, intitulée *On Historical Distance*, qui s'attarde au « caractère littéraire » et à sa reconception du sens de la « distance ». L'article se sert des démarches de l'historien J.H. Hexter, du critique littéraire Ralph Cohen et du philosophe Hans-Georg Gadamer comme points de référence au cours de ce processus.*

When I read Mark Phillips's *On Historical Distance*, one of the first things that struck me — apart from the range of subjects considered and the inherent interest of the way in which each was treated — was the difference between the understanding of historiography manifested in the book and the understanding of historiography that prevailed in the days when I started out as a student of history. This wasn't the first time this had struck me about Phillips's work, which I had been following from its beginnings, but the book marked a kind of culmination, even if he continues to pursue some of its themes in his ongoing work. Already in the 1980s, he was commenting on the absence of any significant "body of practical criticism" of historiography and the tendency of historians examining their own discipline

to focus on historians rather than histories.³ In an article he wrote ten years later, he began by remarking on the growing interest in historiography that had taken place over the previous two decades, and particularly on “the widening acceptance, even within a resistant historical profession, of the ‘literariness’ of historiographical texts.” At the same time, there was not yet a body of literature comparable to that on the rise of the novel, for example, to amount to “what might be called the literary history of historiography.”⁴ With this book, he has given us his version of such a history twenty years later, much other work having intervened.

The question I want to ask here is how we got from then to now — how we got from that earlier understanding of historiography, which I will take as represented by Fritz Stern’s widely used collection of readings, *The Varieties of History*, published in 1956, to the varieties of historical representation considered in Phillips’s book.⁵ I don’t mean by this that *On Historical Distance* is in any way an attack on Stern’s view of history, but that it is a radically different way of looking at historical practice. This is evident throughout the book, but especially so in the introduction, where Phillips sets out a framework of historiographic criticism that is grounded in his wide reading in history, philosophy, and literary history and criticism. The benchmarks I will note along the way are J.H. Hexter’s, an early exponent of a literary approach to historiographic texts; Ralph Cohen, a literary critic whose writings on genre are often cited by Phillips; and Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the pre-eminent philosophers of hermeneutics in the twentieth century. By following this trail, I hope to commend this book to anyone interested in the writing and reading of history, regardless of specialty or discipline.

Stern offered a series of excerpts from works by historians from Voltaire to the present. In his introduction, he observed that, “In writing about their task, which is to *reconstruct* a past they have never known, and that they can neither deduce from first principles nor create by an act of the imagination, they reveal their diverse presuppositions, concerns, and ambitions” (emphasis added).⁶ The act of reconstruction had been studied

by philosophers over the previous century, most recently by the logical positivists, who reflected on the methods of historical research with an eye to judging how closely they conformed to what positivists took to be the standard of knowledge, the practices of physical science in deriving laws of nature. For decades a debate concerning explanation in science and history, initiated by Carl Hempel in 1942, dominated the philosophy of history.⁷ Much of that debate was based more on abstract reasoning than on a reading of actual histories, and most historians ignored it, to the dismay of William H. Dray, the leading Canadian practitioner, who disputed Hempel's claims and argued for a distinctive historical mode of knowledge.⁸ Nevertheless, the terminology of science crept into historical practice, especially history conceived as social science. Other historians adopted a historicist view of their discipline, either consciously or unconsciously, that was derived, at least in part, from R.G. Collingwood, but also from the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey before him, who distinguished the human from the natural sciences. It was widely agreed among these historians, including Stern, that history was a blend of art and science, the proportions of the blending being the prerogative of individual historians.

One thing that all of these critics were agreed on was that there was a proper way of doing history, even if they didn't not agree on what it was. Here I have to note the first fundamental difference between their approach and Phillips's, which is that Phillips is not interested in what historians *ought* to be doing, but in what they actually do, and not just the "great" historians, or exemplary historians, but all those who do history. This difference of approach is most sharply expressed in his criticism of Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, which, for all of its apparent concern with historiography as "a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse," offers instead an analysis of the "deep structures" underlying the "masterworks" of nineteenth-century western European history. It is, in the end, less a history of historiography, Phillips argues, than a universal anatomy in the manner of the literary theorist Northrop Frye, to whom White acknowledges

his indebtedness.⁹ The title of Phillips' introductory chapter of *On Historical Distance*, "Rethinking Historical Distance: From Doctrine to Heuristic," is a signal that his approach is not prescriptive but interpretative. He is offering us a way of reading and thinking about historiography.

One of the few practising historians who took up the challenge presented by the logical positivists was J.H. Hexter, whose work ranged widely beyond his particular field of early modern European thought into criticism of various aspects of historical practice. In Hexter's view, historiography was not the study of historical method or the history of historical thought, but the craft of historical writing, "and/or the yield of such writing considered in its rhetorical aspect." This was its original meaning, as he was at pains to point out in a long entry in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* entitled "Historiography: The Rhetoric of History."¹⁰ He argued that rhetoric — or "style," as Peter Gay was later to call it — was an entirely legitimate subject of study in itself, and one that could tell us much about the way historians understood their discipline.¹¹ It was not simply the "art" with which a historian communicated his or her knowledge of the past, and therefore somehow beyond the realm of systematic study. He distinguished modes of explanation (narrative and analytic), proposed that analysis of historiography might occur on two scales (macro and micro), and looked specifically at a number of rhetorical devices commonly found in histories (footnotes, quotations, and lists). He illustrated his argument in typical Hexter fashion by using examples from baseball.

His essay had little more influence on his fellow historians than the philosophers before him, perhaps because of his idiosyncratic diction and methods, but it did have an influence on Phillips.¹² Already a student of "literariness," having been influenced by Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, and therefore a receptive reader, he took the question of rhetoric much further.¹³ Where Hexter was bound by the written text, Phillips incorporated other modes of representation, and where Hexter focused on rhetoric — and thus on the *form* of representation — Phillips included other dimen-

sions of distance into his heuristic: emotion, or affect (“warm” and “evocative,” for example, *vs.* “cool” and “austere”); moral engagement, or ideology (“detached and objective” *vs.* “committed” or “polemical”); and understanding, or method (“macro” *vs.* “micro,” “thick descriptive” *vs.* “long durational”). Form itself might be “narrative” or an “essay,” for example.¹⁴ Together, these provide a means of understanding historiography as a product of choices and decisions made by historians on their way to negotiating an understanding of the past. I can’t help noting here, parenthetically, that a friend of mine in honours history at the University of Alberta, used to say that he had a hard time choosing between English literature and history as his main field of study, but he ultimately decided that he wanted to do the *real thing* — write history books — rather than become a student or critic of those who did the *real thing* — novelists and poets. Phillips turned this on its head: he melded his interests in literature and history and turned the study of historical literature into a “real thing” on its own, starting with his first book.¹⁵

The multi-dimensional, or combinatorial, aspect of his approach to historiographic texts came in part from his engagement with questions of genre in literature and history, and particularly with the work of Ralph Cohen, the founding editor of *New Literary History*. Cohen — and others, notably Alastair Fowler — developed a conception of genre that was interactive and intertextual.¹⁶ Rather than being simply a classificatory device (the standard view), genre became much more dynamic in their hands, taking in the ways in which different kinds of writing affect each other, and how authors — or painters, or movie-makers, or museum curators — respond to, or choose, their audiences, and how communities of readers and viewers form and evolve along with communities of writers. Genre was a process, as much as a category, Cohen argued, and open-ended: “Genre concepts in theory and practice arise, change, and decline for historical reasons.”¹⁷ Seen in this way, the study of historiography became not just the decipherment of textual devices and their roles in communicating meaning, but an avenue of social and cultural exploration. Where the conventional study of his-

torical writing had a tendency to see history as a single, stable mode of practice (even if, as Stern showed in his collection of readings, practice changed over time), genre offered a means of exploring the full range of historical representation, “high” and “low.”

Somewhere along the line — I can’t actually be sure that the implicit chronology of my discussion is entirely accurate — Phillips incorporated Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics into his critical approach.¹⁸ Hermeneutics gave added depth to Phillips’s longtime belief in the value of historicizing the study of historiography and is perhaps the ingredient that gives his work its down-to-earth quality. He takes the representation of the past as a kind of experience and enters into dialogue with it as he seeks to interpret it, considering both its production by makers of history and its consumption by readers. The dialogic nature of Gadamer’s hermeneutics has affinities with R.G. Collingwood’s logic of question and answer, but Gadamer is less concerned with rethinking the intentions and actions of historical actors in the pursuit of truth than with the interpretation of texts, whatever form they might take, and engaging with their language, whether verbal, visual, or material, in search of meaning.¹⁹ This is an approach that meshes nicely with the concept of genre in its focus on exchange and relationship.

It is also an approach that takes it for granted that historians are part of the thing that they seek to understand — “History does not belong to us,” writes Gadamer, “we belong to it.”²⁰ Understanding is therefore not so much an act of reconstruction as one of mediation. Historians serve as transmitters of the past into the present, and their understanding is necessarily indeterminate, every interpretation creating a new layer of meaning. In this way, Gadamer speaks to the common sense of historians. We are trained, at least to some degree, to set aside or transcend presuppositions, and to stand outside tradition, somewhat in the way that J.H. Plumb argued for the opposition of “history” and “the past,” and for the superiority of the former.²¹ The major way of achieving detachment is to adopt some sort of “method,” yet we — or many of us — often feel there is something artificial

in doing this. We compartmentalize our selves, rather than recognizing our prejudices and predispositions as part of our reality inherited from the past and opening a path to understanding it. Phillips's favourite definition of history is Jacob Burckhardt's, to the effect that history "is on all occasions the record of that which one age finds worthy of note in another."²² Hermeneutics thus offers a resolution of the tension between science and storytelling that puzzled Hexter more than half a century ago.

I'm only too conscious of the risk of simplifying and even distorting the deeply thought-out approach to historiography that is presented in *On Historical Distance*, or, on the other hand, of making it sound inaccessible to those of us less immersed in the history and theory of the subject than the author. What the book accomplishes, at the very least, is to complicate our idea of distance; it succeeds in "de-familiarizing" (as Phillips once wrote) an understanding of distance that was once so conventional as to have become part of the common sense of most historians. Distance was taken predominantly to refer to the passage of time, which lent "perspective" to one's subject, analogous to perspective in art, and led to greater understanding. In Phillips's view, not only is this not necessarily true, but distance is the creation of historians as much as a temporal given. It denotes a spectrum of possibilities ranging from the immediate to the remote in any or all of the dimensions of his heuristic.

Different readers will have different questions about this book, as can be seen in the other panelists' presentations. For my part, I would have found it interesting to see Phillips's framework of criticism applied to the historical essay, especially its modernist variant, which was anything but sentimental but created its own closeness to its subject by its ideological commitment and its orientation (as Phillips suggests generally of ideology) to the future. I also wonder whether linear narratives are as closed to contrast as Phillips suggests (and which is highlighted by Barbara Leckie's paper). "[H]istorical thought is inescapably comparative," he writes at one point, yet traditional narrative forms of history, in giving priority to sequence and continuity, "seldom acknowledge" comparison and contrast.²³ This perhaps underestimates

the plasticity of narrative. In Garrett Mattingly's *The Armada*, for example, a classic in the genre of historical narrative, not only are movements back and forth in time sometimes contrastive in their bearing, but the author is occasionally explicit about his vantage point in the present (1959 in his case). Describing the unsettled quarters in Rome of Dr. William Allen, the English Catholic exile, Mattingly writes, "One has seen the same look of temporary tenancy in the dwellings of more recent exiles."²⁴ Questions like these are marks of the stimulus offered by *On Historical Distance*.

Phillips's introduction on which I have focused my attention functions as a kind of "horizon" of understanding, to borrow one of Gadamer's key terms, against which the instances of historiographic practice that Phillips has chosen for particular study can fruitfully be interpreted. By reviving what he calls the "capaciousness" of the concept of distance, his critical framework makes possible a wider and deeper engagement with histories of all kinds.²⁵ What we customarily judge as "bias," for example — and as such a violation of what are conventionally regarded as the norms of distance — can be examined in terms of the mediating role of ideology or affect. And by offering a set of essays, in the sense of experiments or forays, in the application of his framework to a wide variety of historical representations, both past and present, he shows us what we can learn from it and how we might use it ourselves. I can't recommend the book too highly.

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