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# Interpretation in History

Hayden White

**T**HEORISTS OF HISTORIOGRAPHY generally agree that all historical narratives contain an irreducible and inextinguishable element of interpretation. The historian has to interpret his materials in order to construct the moving pattern of images in which the form of the historical process is to be mirrored. And this because the historical record is both too full and too sparse. On the one hand, there are always more facts in the record than the historian can possibly include in his narrative representation of a given segment of the historical process. And so the historian must "interpret" his data by excluding certain facts from his account as irrelevant to his narrative purpose. On the other hand, in his efforts to reconstruct "what happened" in any given period of history, the historian inevitably must include in his narrative an account of some event or complex of events for which the facts that would permit a plausible explanation of its occurrence are lacking. And this means that the historian must "interpret" his materials by filling in the gaps in his information on inferential or speculative grounds. A historical narrative is thus necessarily a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts, at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative.

Precisely because theorists generally admit the ineluctably interpretative aspect of historiography, they have tended to subordinate study of the problem of interpretation to that of explanation. Once it is admitted that all histories are in some sense interpretations, it becomes necessary to determine the extent to which historians' explanations of past events can qualify as objective, if not rigorously scientific, accounts of reality. And historical theorists for the past twenty-five years have therefore tried to clear up the epistemological status of historical representations and to establish their authority as explanations, rather than to study

various types of interpretations met with in historiography.<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, the problem of interpretation in history has been dealt with in efforts to analyze the work of the great "metahistorians." It is generally thought that "speculative philosophers of history" such as Hegel, Marx, Spengler, and Toynbee trade in more or less interesting "interpretations" of history rather than in the putative "explanations" which they claim to have provided. But the work of such "metahistorians" is usually conceived to differ radically from that of the so-called "proper historian," who pursues more modest aims, eschewing the impulse to solve "the riddle of history" and to identify the plan or goal of the historical process as a whole. The "proper historian," it is usually contended, seeks to explain what happened in the past by providing a precise and accurate reconstruction of the events reported in the documents. He does this presumably by suppressing as far as possible his impulse to interpret the data, or at least by indicating in his narrative where he is merely representing the facts and where he is interpreting them. Thus, in historical theory, explanation is conceived to stand over against interpretation as clearly discernible elements of every "proper" historical representation. In "metahistory," by contrast, the explanatory and the interpretative aspects of the narrative tend to be run together and to be confused in such a way as to dissolve its authority as either a representation of "what happened" in the past or a valid explanation of why it happened as it did.<sup>2</sup>

Now, in this essay I shall argue that the distinction between "proper history" and "metahistory" obscures more than it illuminates about the nature of interpretation in historiography in general. Moreover, I

1 This generalization is more true of American and British theorists than of Continental European ones. For a representative selection of approaches to the problem of historical explanation developed over the last twenty-five years in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, see W. H. Dray, ed., *Philosophical Analysis and History* (New York, 1966). Dray summarizes the principal issues in his own *Philosophy of History* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1964); but see also Louis O. Mink, "Philosophical Analysis and Historical Understanding," *Review of Metaphysics*, 21, No. 4 (June 1968), 667-98. The Continental European interest in the problem of historical interpretation has developed within the context of the general interest in hermeneutics. See Arthur Child, *Interpretation: A General Theory* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1965), and *idem*, "Five Conceptions of History," *Ethics*, 68, No. 1 (Oct. 1957), 28-38.

2 The term "metahistory" is used as a synonym for "speculative philosophy of history" by Northrop Frye in "New Directions from Old," *Fables of Identity* (New York, 1963), pp. 52-66. On speculative philosophy of history, see Dray, *Philosophy of History*, pp. 59 ff., and W. H. Walsh, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (London, 1961), Ch. iii. On the conception of "speculative philosophy of history" as implicit mythopoesis, see Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago, 1949).

shall maintain that there can be no "proper history" without the presupposition of a full-blown "metahistory" by which to justify those interpretative strategies necessary for the representation of a given segment of the historical process. In taking this line, I continue a tradition of historical theory established during the nineteenth century at the time of history's constitution as an academic discipline. This tradition took shape in opposition to the specious claim, made by Ranke and his epigoni, for the scientific rigor of historiography.

During the nineteenth century, four major theorists of historiography rejected the myth of objectivity prevailing among Ranke's followers. Hegel, Droysen, Nietzsche, and Croce all viewed interpretation as the very soul of historiography, and each tried to work out a classification of its types. Hegel, for example, distinguished among four types of interpretation within the class of what he called Reflective historiography: Universal, Pragmatic, Critical, and Conceptual.<sup>3</sup> Droysen, writing in the 1860s, also discerned four possible interpretative strategies in historical writing: Causal, Conditional, Psychological, and Ethical.<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche, in "The Use and Abuse of History," conceived of four approaches to historical representation: Monumental, Antiquarian, Critical, and his own "Superhistorical" approach.<sup>5</sup> And, finally, Croce purported to find four different philosophical positions from which historians of the nineteenth century had claimed, with different degrees of legitimacy, to make sense of the historical record: Romantic, Idealist, Positivist, and Critical.<sup>6</sup>

3 G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), pp. 14 ff. By "Reflective" historiography, Hegel means history written from a self-consciously critical point of view and in the full awareness of the temporal distance between the historian and the events about which he writes. This in contrast to "Original" (*ursprüngliche*) historiography, in which the historian writes as it were "naively" about events in his own present, in the manner of Thucydides, on the one side, and "Philosophical" (*philosophische*) historiography, in which a philosopher, reflecting on the works of historians, attempts to derive the general laws or principles characterizing the historical process as a whole, on the other. Within the class of "Reflective" historiography, Hegel draws further distinctions on the basis of the critical self-consciousness of the historian, from the "naively" reflective Universal historian (such as Livy) to the "sentimental" Conceptual historians of his own time (such as Niebuhr).

4 J. G. Droysen, "Grundriss der Historik," in *Historik: Vorlesungen der Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Geschichte*, ed. Rudolf Hubner, 3rd ed. (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1958), pp. 340-43.

5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (Basel: Verlag Birkhauser, n. d.), pp. 17-27.

6 Benedetto Croce, *History: Its Theory and Practice*, tr. Douglas Ainslee (New York, 1960), pp. 263 ff.

The fourfold nature of these classifications of the modes of historiographical interpretation is itself suggestive, and I will comment on its significance for an understanding of interpretation in general later. For the moment I want to dwell upon the different reasons which each of these theorists gave for insisting on the ineluctably interpretative element in every historical narrative worthy of the name. First, all of these theorists rejected the Rankean conception of the "innocent eye" of the historian and the notion that the elements of the historical narrative, the "facts," were apodictically provided rather than constituted by the historian's own agency. All of them stressed the active, inventive aspect of the historian's putative "inquiry" into "what had really happened" in the past. For Droysen, interpretation was necessary simply because the historical record was incomplete. If we can say with some certitude "what happened," we cannot always say, on the basis of appeal to the record, "why" it happened as it did. The record had to be interpreted, and this meant "seeing realities in past events, realities with that certain plenitude of conditions which they must have had in order that they might become realities." This "seeing" was a cognitive act, and, in Droysen's view, it had to be distinguished from the more obviously "artistic" activity in which the historian constructed an appropriate literary representation of the "realities" thus seen in a prose discourse. Even in representation, however, interpretation was necessary, since historians might choose on aesthetic grounds different plot-structures by which to endow sequences of events with different meanings as types of stories.<sup>7</sup>

Nietzsche, by contrast, insisted that interpretation was necessary in historiography due to the nature of that "objectivity" for which the historian strived. This objectivity was not that of the scientist or the judge in a court of law, but rather that of the artist, more specifically that of the dramatist. The historian's task was to think dramatically, that is to say, "to think one thing with another, and weave the elements into a single whole, with the presumption that the unity of plan must be put into the objects if it is not already there." Nietzsche professed to be able to imagine "a kind of historical writing that had no drop of common fact in it and yet could claim to be called in the highest degree objective."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, he denied that the value of history lay in the

7 Droysen, pp. 339, 344, 361-62. The translation is from E. B. Andrews' English version of Droysen's work, *Outline of the Principles of History* (Boston, 1893), p. 26.

8 Nietzsche, p. 57. The translations from this work quoted in the text are by Adrian Collins, in *The Use and Abuse of History* (Indianapolis and New York, 1957), pp. 37-38.

disclosure of facts previously unknown or in the generalization that might be produced by reflection on the facts. "In other disciplines," he observed, "the generalizations are the most important things, as they contain the laws." But if the historian's generalizations are to stand as laws, he pointed out, then "the historian's labor is lost; for the residue of truth contained in them, after the obscure and insoluble part is removed, is nothing but the commonest knowledge. The smallest range of experience will teach it." On the contrary, he concluded, the real value of history lay "in inventing ingenious variations on a probably commonplace theme, in raising the popular melody to a universal symbol and showing what a world of depth, power and beauty exists in it."<sup>9</sup>

Hegel and Croce of course were unwilling to go so far in their conceptualizations of the historian's interpretative activities. Both were concerned to establish the cognitive authority of the historian's representations of the past, and both insisted that the historian's efforts to make sense of the facts had to be guided by a kind of critical self-consciousness that was specifically philosophical in nature. But like Droysen and Nietzsche, Hegel and Croce alike placed historiography among the literary arts and sought to ground the historian's insights into reality in a poetic intuition of the particular. Where they differed from most of their philosophical successors was in their belief that poetry was a form of knowledge, indeed the basis of all knowledge (scientific, religious, and philosophical), and in their conviction that history, like other formalizations of poetic insight, was as much a "making" (an *inventio*) as it was a "finding" of the facts that comprised the structure of its perceptions.<sup>10</sup>

Contemporary philosophers, working under the conviction that poetic

9 *Ibid.*, p. 59 (translation, p. 39).

10 It is frequently overlooked by commentators on Hegel's idea of history that his most comprehensive discussion of history-writing is to be found, not in his *Philosophie der Geschichte*, but in his *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik, Dritter Teil, Drittes Kapitel*, which is entitled "Die Poesie." Hegel treats history-writing as a form of prose poetry, differing from poetry in general not by its aim and form but by its content, which is the "prosaic" events of daily life. He denies, of course, that history is a "free art," because the historian is bound to the representation of the "facts" attested by the documents. But he insists, like Nietzsche later, that the principles of history-writing are precisely the same as those informing the drama, and tragic drama specifically. See the *Ästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), III, 256-61. The *Philosophie der Geschichte*, it must be stressed, is concerned not with history-writing per se but with the problem of drawing generalizations about the course of world history from the fragmentary accounts of it provided by historians who have ascended to the fourth level of historiographical self-consciousness, Conceptualization (*Begriffsgeschichte*). Croce's discussion of history as an art can be found in *Aesthetic: As Science of Expression and General Linguistic* (New York, 1968), pp. 26-30.



and scientific insights are more different than similar, have been concerned to salvage history's claim to scientific status—and have tended therefore to play down the importance of the interpretative element in historical narratives. They have been inclined to inquire into the extent to which a historical narrative can be considered as something other than a *mere* interpretation, on the assumption that what is interpretation is not knowledge but only opinion and the belief that what is not objective in a scientific sense is not worth knowing.

In general, contemporary theorists have resolved the problem of history's epistemological status in two ways. One group, taking a positivistic view of explanation, has argued that historians explain past events only insofar as they succeed in identifying the laws of causation governing the processes in which the events occur. They maintain, moreover, that history can claim the status of a science only in the extent to which historians actually succeed in identifying the laws that actually determine historical processes.<sup>11</sup> Another group, taking a somewhat more literary tack, has insisted that historians explain the events that make up their narratives by specifically narrative means of encodation, that is to say, by finding the story which lies buried within or behind the events and telling it in a way that an ordinarily educated man would understand. Such an explanation, however, this group insists, though "literary" in form, is not to be considered as nonscientific or antiscientific. A "narrativist" explanation in history qualifies as a contribution to our objective knowledge of the world, because it is empirical in nature and subject to techniques of verification and disconfirmation in the same way that theories in science are.<sup>12</sup> Both groups of the-

11 The classic defense of the nomological-deductive conception of historical explanation is by Carl G. Hempel, "Explanation in Science and in History," reprinted in Dray, *Philosophical Analysis and History*, pp. 95-126. Hempel's thesis is that "explanation . . . is basically the same in all areas of scientific inquiry," that insofar as historian's "explain" and thereby provide "understanding" of past events, they must do so by employing the same "deductive and nomological" tactics of the physical science; but that since they are prohibited by the nature of the events they deal with, the best that they can legitimately aspire to, in the way of an explanation of them, are porous, partial, or sketchy pseudoexplanations. See the exposition and critique of this view by Alan Donagan, "The Popper-Hempel Theory Reconsidered," in Dray, *Philosophical Analysis and History*, pp. 127-59.

12 The narrativist view of historical explanation holds that historians provide understanding of past events and processes by clarifying the story-line of finite segments of the historical record. A historical process is, on this view, rather like the unfolding of a game of sport, the outcome of which is not predictable in advance of its resolution but is *retrospectively* comprehensible. A given historical process is rendered comprehensible by the historian by the kind of tracking operation carried out by sportswriters after a given game has been concluded. By unpacking the elements of the concluded game, arranging them on a time-line, and permitting them

orists grant that "interpretation" may enter into the historian's account of the past at some point in the construction of his narrative and recommend that historians try to distinguish between those aspects of their accounts that are empirically founded and those based on interpretative strategies. They differ primarily over the question of the precise formal nature of the explanatory element present in any responsible historical narrative. As for the interpretative element that might appear in a historical account of the past, they are inclined to identify this with the historian's efforts to fill in gaps in the record by speculation, to infer motives of historical agents, and to assess the impact, influence, or significance of empirically established facts with respect to other segments of the historical record.<sup>13</sup>

Critics of historiography as a discipline, however, have taken more radical views on the matter of interpretation in history, going so far as to argue that historical accounts are *nothing but* interpretations, in the establishment of the events that make up the chronicle of the narrative no less than in assessments of the meaning or significance of those events for the understanding of the historical process in general. Thus, for example, in *The Savage Mind*, Claude Lévi-Strauss has suggested that the formal coherency of any historical narrative consists solely of a "fraudulent outline" imposed by the historian upon a body of materials which could be called "data" only in the most extended sense of the term. Historical accounts are inevitably interpretative, Lévi-Strauss argues, because of "a twofold antinomy in the very notion of an historical fact." A historical fact is "what really took place," he notes; but *where*, he asks, did anything take place? Any historical episode—in a revolution or a war, for example—can be resolved into a "multitude of individual psychic moments." Each of these in turn can be translated into a manifestation of some more basic process of "unconscious development, and these resolve themselves into cerebral, hormonal, or nervous phenomena, which themselves have reference to the physical and chemical order." Thus Lévi-Strauss concludes, historical facts are in no sense "given" to the historian but are rather "constituted" by the

to unfold gradually before the gaze of the reader, the historian renders their articulation "followable *after all*" in a way that they were not followable during their original unfolding. For a defense of this view, see W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (New York, 1968), Ch. ii, and Louis O. Mink, "The Autonomy of Historical Understanding," in Dray, *Philosophical Analysis and History*, pp. 160-92. The logical structure of historical narratives, based on the model of what is called "narrative sentences," is convincingly analyzed in Arthur C. Danto's *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge, 1965).

13 See Isaiah Berlin, "The Concept of Scientific History," in Dray, *Philosophical Analysis and History*, pp. 40-51.



historian himself “by abstraction and as though under the threat of an infinite regress.”

Moreover, Lévi-Strauss maintains, if historical facts are “constituted” rather than “given,” so too are they “selected” rather than apodictically provided as elements of a narrative. Confronted with a chaos of “facts,” the historian must “choose, sever and carve them up” for narrative purposes. In short, historical facts, originally constituted as “data” by the historian, must be constituted a second time as elements of a verbal structure which is always written for a specific (manifest or latent) purpose. This means that, in his view, “History” is never simply history, but always “history-for,” history written in the interest of some infrascientific aim or vision.<sup>14</sup>

In his “Overture to le Cru et le cuit,” Lévi-Strauss suggests that the interpretative aspect of historiography is specifically mythical in nature. Commenting on the plethora of works dealing with the French Revolution, he observes that:

In them, authors do not always make use of the same incidents; when they do, the incidents are revealed in quite different lights. And yet these are variations which have to do with the same country, the same period, and the same events—events whose reality is scattered across every level of a multilayered structure.

This suggests that the criterion of validity by which historical accounts might be assessed cannot depend upon their “elements,” i.e., their putative “factual” content. On the contrary, he notes:

Pursued in isolation, each element would show itself to be beyond grasp. But certain of them derive consistency from the fact that they can be integrated into a system whose terms are more or less credible when set off against the overall coherence of the series.

The coherence of the series, however, is the coherence of myth. As Lévi-Strauss puts it: “In spite of worthy and indispensable efforts to bring another moment in history alive and to possess it, a clairvoyant history should admit that it never completely escapes from the nature of myth.”<sup>15</sup>

To be sure, in *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss grants that history can be distinguished from myth by virtue of its dependency on and

14 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London, 1966), p. 257.

15 Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Overture to le Cru et le cuit,” in *Structuralism*, ed. Jacques Ehrmann (New York, 1966), pp. 47-48.

responsibility to those “dates” that make up its specious objective framework. It is dates, he says, which justify the historian’s search for “temporal relationships” and sanction the conceptualization of events in terms of “the relation of *before* and *after*. . . .” But, he argues, even this reliance on the chronological record does not save the historian from mythic interpretations of his materials. For in fact not only are there “hot” and “cold” chronologies (chronologies in which more or less numbers of dates appear to demand inclusion in any full account of “what was happening”), but, more importantly, the “dates” themselves come to us already grouped into “classes of dates” which are constitutive of the putative “domains of history” that historians of a given age must confront as “problems” to be solved. In short, appeal to the chronological sequence affords no relief from the charge that the coherency of the historical account is mythological in nature. For the chronicle is no less constituted as a record of the past by the historian’s own agency than is the narrative which he constructs on its basis. And when it is a matter of working up a comprehensive account of the various “domains” of the historical record, any “alleged historical continuity” that might be built into such an account “is secured only by dint of fraudulent outlines” imposed by the historian himself upon the record.

These “fraudulent outlines,” Lévi-Strauss maintains, make up the sum total of those putative “explanations” that historians offer of past structures and processes. These explanations, in turn, represent products of decisions to ignore specific “domains” in the interest of achieving a purely formal coherency in representation. Which means that historical interpretation appears in that space created by the tension between the impulse *to explain* on the one side and *to convey information* on the other. Or as he puts it:

The historian’s relative choice, with respect to each domain of history he gives up, is always confined to the choice between history which teaches us more and explains less, and history which explains more and teaches less.<sup>16</sup>

Historians then must, on Lévi-Strauss’ analysis, decide whether they want to *explain* the past (in which case they are indentured to mythic modes of representation) or simply *add* to the body of “facts” requiring such representation. And this dilemma can be escaped, he maintains, only if we recognize that “history is a method with no distinct

16 Lévi-Strauss, *Savage Mind*, pp. 258-62.

object corresponding to it"; it is a discipline without a particular subject uniquely consigned to it. Against the humanistic belief that man or the human in general is the peculiar object of historical reflection, Lévi-Strauss insists that history "is tied neither to man nor to any particular object." History, he says, "consists wholly of its method, which experience proves to be indispensable for cataloguing the elements of any structure whatever, human or non-human, in its entirety." Thus, history is in no sense a science, although as a "method" it does contribute to the sciences by virtue of its cataloguing operations. What the historian offers as explanations of structures and processes in the past, in the form of narratives, are simply formalizations of those "fraudulent outlines" which are ultimately mythic in nature.<sup>17</sup>

This conception of historiography bears a number of striking resemblances to those of Northrop Frye and the late R. G. Collingwood. Both of these thinkers analyze the element of "construct" in historical representation, the extent to which the historian must necessarily "interpret" the "data" given him by the historical record in order to provide something like an "explanation" of it. In a brief essay on the kind of "metahistorical" speculations produced by Hegel, Marx, and Spengler, Frye remarks that: "We notice that when a historian's scheme gets to a certain point of comprehensiveness it becomes mythical in shape, and so approaches the poetic in its structure." And he goes on to speak of "romantic historical myths based on a quest or pilgrimage to a City of God or a classless society; . . . comic historical myths of progress through evolution or revolution; [and] . . . tragic myths of decline and fall, recurrence or casual catastrophe."<sup>18</sup>

But, Frye insists, the historian does not (or at least should not) impose a pattern upon his data; he must proceed "inductively, collecting his facts and trying to avoid any informing patterns except those that he sees, or is honestly convinced he sees, in the facts themselves." Unlike the poet who, in Frye's view, works "deductively," *from* an apprehension of the pattern that he intends to impose upon his subject, the historian works *toward* the unifying form of his narrative, after he has finished his "research." But the difference between a historical and a fictional account of the world is formal, not substantive; it resides in the relative weights given to the constructive elements in them: "the informing pattern of the historian's book, which is his *mythos* or plot, is secondary, just as detail to a poet is secondary."<sup>19</sup>

17 *Ibid.*, p. 262.

18 Frye, "New Directions from Old," pp. 53-54.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

Thus, although Frye wants to insist on important differences between poetry and history, he is sensitive to the extent to which they resemble one another. And although he wants to believe that “proper history” can be distinguished from “metahistory,” on his own analysis of the structures of prose fictions, he must be prepared to grant that there is a mythic element in “proper history” by which the structures and processes depicted in its narratives are endowed with meanings of a specifically fictive kind. A historical interpretation, like a poetic fiction, can be said to appeal to its readers as a plausible representation of the world by virtue of its implicit appeal to those “pre-generic plot-structures” or archetypal story-forms that define the modalities of a given culture’s literary endowment.<sup>20</sup> Historians, no less than poets, can be said to gain an “explanatory affect”—over and above whatever formal explanations they may offer of specific historical events—by building into their narratives patterns of meaning similar to those more explicitly provided by the literary art of the cultures to which they belong. This mythic element in their work is recognizable in those historical accounts, such as Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*, which continue to be honored as classics long after the “facts” contained in them have been refined beyond recognition by subsequent research and their formal explanatory arguments have been transcended by the advent of new sociological and psychological theories.

By an extension of Frye’s ideas, it can be argued that interpretation in history consists of the provisions of a plot-structure for a sequence of events so that their nature as a comprehensible process is revealed by their figuration as a *story of a particular kind*. What one historian may emplot as a tragedy, another may emplot as a comedy or romance. As thus envisaged, the “story” which the historian purports to “find” in the historical record is proleptic to the “plot” by which the events are finally revealed to figure a recognizable structure of relationships of a specifically mythic sort. In historical narrative, story is to plot as the exposition of “what happened” in the past is to the synoptic characterization of what the whole sequence of events contained in the narrative might “mean” or “signify.”<sup>21</sup> Or to use Frye’s terms, in history as in

20 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 162 ff.

21 See Mink, “The Autonomy of Historical Understanding,” pp. 179-86, and Walsh, *Philosophy of History*, p. 33. I use the term “plot” in much the same sense that Mink uses the notion of the “syntax” of events, which the historian seeks within or behind the welter of facts confronting him in the narrative. Walsh distinguishes between a “mere” chronicle and the “smooth narrative” constructed by the historian from the events contained in the chronicle. In the “smooth narrative,” he says, “every event falls as it were into its natural place and belongs to an intelligible

fiction, "while we read, we are aware of a sequence of metaphorical identifications; when we have finished, we are aware of an organizing structural pattern or conceptualized myth."<sup>22</sup> And if this is true, then it follows that there are at least two levels of interpretation in every historical work: one in which the historian constitutes a story out of the chronicle of events and another in which, by a more fundamental narrative technique, he progressively identifies the *kind of story* he is telling, comedy, tragedy, romance, epic, or satire, as the case might be. It would be on the second level of interpretation that the mythic consciousness would operate most clearly.

But on Frye's view, it would not operate capriciously, as Lévi-Strauss appears to suggest. It operates rather according to well-known, if frequently violated, literary conventions, conventions which the historian, like the poet, begins to assimilate from the first moment he is told a story as a child. There are, then, "rules" if not "laws" of historical narration. Michelet, for example, is not only a "romanticist" historian, he consistently emplots his history of France up to the Revolution of 1789 as a "romance." And Tocqueville's putative "realism," so often contrasted with Michelet's purported "romanticism," consists in large part of his decision to emplot that same history in the mode of tragedy. The conflict between these two interpretations of French history does not occur on the level of the "facts" which make up the chronicle of the process under analysis, but rather on the level on which the story to be told about the facts is constituted as a story of a particular kind.

Here myths function in the way suggested by Warner Berthoff: not to explain what to think about events and objects in the perceptual field,

but with what degree of force to think—and how precisely to situate the constituents of the thinkable . . . to attribute to the species of fact in question the element or quality of the causative, or of causativeness, i.e., generic origination, . . . and to define, by selection-and-arrangement of appropriate terms that constitutes their form, that species or class of importance peculiar to the occasion they embrace. . . .

The mythic element in historical narration, in short, indicates, "for-

whole. In this respect, the ideal of the historian is in principle identical with that of the novelist or the dramatist." On the distinction between story and plot, see Boris Tomashevsky, "Thematics," pp. 66-75, and Boris Eichenbaum, "The Theory of the 'Formal Method,'" pp. 115-21, both in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, tr. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln, 1965).

22 Frye, *Anatomy*, pp. 352-53.

mally, the appropriate gravity and respect" to be accorded by the reader to the species of facts reported in the narrative.<sup>23</sup>

The distinction being appealed to here—between story and plot in historical narration—is similar to that advanced by Collingwood in his analysis of historical interpretation in his *The Idea of History*. In his discussion of the extent to which historians legitimately go beyond what their "authorities" tell them had happened in the past, Collingwood postulated a twofold interpretative strategy: critical and constructive. In the critical phase of their work, Collingwood maintained, historians were permitted to draw upon the scientific lore of their own time in order to justify rejection of certain kinds of facts, however well attested by the documentary record—as when, for example, they reject amply attested reports of miracles. By criticism of the documents, the historian establishes the "framework" of his narrative, the set of facts out of which a "story" is to be fashioned in his narrative account of them. His problem, once this framework is established, is to fill in the gaps in the record by a deduction of facts that "must have occurred" from knowledge of those which are known actually to have occurred. Thus, for example, if one knows that Caesar was in Gaul at one time and in Rome at another time, one can legitimately infer that he must have passed between these two places during the interval between them. And the drawing of such inferences was an example, he argued, of the operation of that "constructive imagination" without which no historical narrative could be produced.<sup>24</sup>

But the constructive imagination is not, in Collingwood's view, limited to the inference of purely physical relationships and processes. The constructive imagination directs the historian's attention to the *form* that a given set of events must have in order to serve as a possible "object of thought." To be sure, in his account of the matter, Collingwood tended to conclude that the possible object of thought in question was the "story" of what actually happened in a given time and place in the past. At the same time, however, he insisted that the constructive imagination was both *a priori* (which meant that it did not act capriciously) and *structural* (which meant that it was governed by notions of formal coherency in its constitution of possible objects of thought). What was "found" in the historical record by the historian had to be augmented by projection onto the historical record of those

23 Warner Berthoff, "Fiction, History, Myth: Notes Towards the Discrimination of Narrative Forms," in *The Interpretation of Narrative: Theory and Practice*, ed. Morton W. Bloomfield (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 277-78.

24 R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), pp. 239-41.



notions of possible structures of human being and comportment existing in the historian's consciousness even before the investigation of the record began.<sup>25</sup>

But surely the historian does not bring with him a notion of the "story" that lies embedded within the "facts" given by the record. For in fact there are an infinite number of such stories contained therein, all different in their details, each unlike every other. What the historian must bring to his consideration of the record are general notions of the *kinds of stories* that might be found there, just as he must bring to consideration of the problem of narrative representation some notion of the "pre-generic plot-structure" by which the story *he* tells is endowed with formal coherency. In other words, the historian must draw upon a fund of culturally provided "mythoi" in order to constitute the facts as figuring a story of a particular kind, just as he must appeal to that same fund of "mythoi" in the minds of his readers to endow his account of the past with the odor of meaning or significance. If, as Lévi-Strauss correctly observes, one *can* tell a host of different stories about the single set of events conventionally designated as "the French Revolution," this does not mean that the *types* of stories that can be told about the set are infinite in number. The types of stories that can be told about the French Revolution are limited to the number of modes of emplotment which the myths of the Western literary tradition sanction as appropriate ways of endowing human processes with meanings.

The distinction between "story" and "plot" in historical narrative permits us further to specify what is involved in a "narrative explanation." In fact, by a specific arrangement of the events reported in the documents, and without offense to the truth value of the facts selected, a given sequence of events can be emplotted in a number of different ways. For example, the events which occurred in France in 1789-90, which Burke viewed as an unalloyed national disaster, Michelet regards as an epiphany of that union of man with God informing the dream of the romance as a generic story-form. Similarly, what Michelet takes as an unambiguous legacy of those events for his own time, Tocqueville interprets as both a burden and an opportunity. Tocqueville emplots the fall of the Old Regime as a tragic descent, but one from which the survivors of the *agon* can profit, while Burke views that same descent as a process of degradation from which little, if any, profit can be derived. Marx, on the other hand, explicitly characterizes the fall of the Old Regime as a "tragedy" in order to contrast it with the "comic" efforts to maintain feudalism by artificial means in the Germany of his

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 241-45.

own time. In short, the historians mentioned each tell a different story about the French Revolution and “explain” it thereby. It is as if Homer, Sophocles, Aristophanes, and Menander had all taken the same set of events and made out of them the kind of story that each preferred as the image of the way that human life, in its historicity, “really was.”<sup>26</sup>

Now, to raise the question of the distinction between stories and plot-structures is to verge upon a problem which literary critics hostile to Northrop Frye’s theory of fictions are likely to find unpalatable. I therefore hasten to state that I am not invoking the distinction between story and plot-structure in order to defend Frye’s specific theory of fictions, in which pre-generic plot-structures are interpreted as the “displaced” forms of the “mythoi” that supposedly give to different poetic fictions one among others of their specific emotive affects. I invoke the distinction in order to suggest its utility as a way of identifying the specifically “fictive” element in historical accounts of the world. This requires that I reject Frye’s distinction between (undisplaced) myths, fiction, and such forms of direct prose discourse as historiography, and to assert that the similarities between these three forms are just as important for the understanding of historical interpretation as any differences among

26 In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New York, 1961), Burke characterizes the Revolution as a “strange chaos of levity and ferocity” in which “all sorts of crimes” are “jumbled together with all sorts of follies.” He calls it a “monstrous tragi-comic scene” and contrasts it with the English Revolution of 1688 in which the true principles of the national life were at last made manifest. See *Reflections*, pp. 21-22, 29-37. Michelet, by contrast, speaks of the events of 1789-90 as a time of perfect unity of people, country, nature, and God: “Fraternity has removed every obstacle, all the federations are about to confederate together, and union tends to unity.—No more federations! They are useless, only one now is necessary,—France; and it appears transfigured in the glory of July. . . . There is nothing but what breathes the pure love of unity.” Jules Michelet, *History of the French Revolution*, tr. Charles Cocks (Chicago, 1967), pp. 442-44. For Tocqueville’s conception of the Revolution, see the famous Chapter iii of Part I of *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, tr. Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1955), pp. 10-13, and Chapter v of the same Part I, “What did the French Revolution accomplish?,” pp. 19-21. Ranke, with typically “comic” confidence in the power of history to effect by evil means a generally salubrious political order, views his own age of the Restoration as a perfectly “reconciled” condition. In his *Politische Gespräche*, he characterizes the system of nation-states that has taken shape in the wake of the Revolutionary epoch in the following terms: “These many separate, earthly-spiritual communities called forth by moral energy, growing irresistibly, progressing amidst all the turmoil of the world towards the ideal, each in its own way! Behold them, these celestial bodies, in their cycles, their mutual gravitation, their systems!” Theodore von Laue, *Leopold von Ranke: The Formative Years* (Princeton, 1950), p. 180. For Marx’s contrast between the history of France and that of Germany in terms of the “tragic” nature of the former and the “comic” nature of the latter, see his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*.

them that we might be able to accept as validly specified. For, if Collingwood is right in his analysis of the workings of the "constructive imagination" in the composition of historical narratives, then it is possible to conclude that the "constructive" element which he discerned in every such narrative is contained precisely in the historians choice of a "pre-generic plot-structure" or "myth" by which to identify the "story" he has told as a "story of a particular kind," epic, romance, comedy, tragedy, or satire, as the case may be. And I shall suggest that one element in the historian's "interpretation" of the events depicted in the "story" he tells, as a way of "explaining" what happened in the past, lies in his choice of the "pre-generic plot-structure" by which to transform a chronicle of events into a "history" comprehended by its readers as a "story of a particular kind."

To be sure, by this extension of Frye's arguments regarding the structure of poetic fictions, the distinction between "proper history" and "metahistory" tends to dissolve into a matter of emphasis. Historical narratives of the sort produced by Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt must be conceived to have the same formal attributes as those "philosophies of history" constructed by Hegel, Marx, Spengler,

27 Frye touches on this point in his essay "New Directions from Old," when he suggests that "there is something of the same kind of affinity between poetry and metaphysics that there is between poetry and metahistory" (p. 56). But the presupposition underlying the theory of fictions set forth in the *Anatomy of Criticism* is that undisplaced mythic visions of the world are opposed to the world-view informing "realistic" discursive prose structures, descriptive and assertive, with "fictions" occupying a middle ground between them. This dichotomization would be legitimate enough if the poles of the spectrum were represented by mythic visions on the one side and scientific conceptualizations of reality on the other. But assertive prose representations of the world such as history cannot be assimilated to the category of the scientific unambiguously. It is only superficially true that history directs attention to the content of the narrative (the "facts") rather than to the form of the narrative in which they are embedded. Like the realistic novel, a history is on one level an allegory. The degree of displacement of the informing (mythic) plot-structure may be greater in history than in poetry, but the differences between a history and a fictional account of reality are matters of degree rather than of kind. Of the formal elements of historical narratives, we can say what Frye says of fictions in general. That is, "form" can be conceived as a "shaping" or as a "containing" principle. As "shaping," it can be thought of as a narrative; as "containing," it can be thought of as providing "meaning" (p. 83). And so too we can distinguish between two kinds of meaning provided by the historical narrative; a history contains both "hypothetical" and "assertive" elements in the same way that "realistic" novels do (p. 80). A history may present itself as a "mimesis praxeos," while myths may be "secondary imitations" of actions, i.e., of *typical* actions, which may indeed make them *more* philosophical than history (p. 83). But historians could not compose their narratives without invoking, at least implicitly, the formal structures of myth for the "shaping" and "containing" effects of their representations of reality.

and Toynbee. This is not to suggest that we cannot find obvious differences between a historical account that purports simply to tell a story and those that come attended by complex theories of historical causation and formally articulated systems of ideological implication. But it is to suggest that the difference conventionally invoked, between a historical account that “explains” by story-telling on the one side and that which conceptually overdetermines its data in the interest of imposing a specific shape on the historical process, obscures as much as it illuminates about the nature of “interpretation” in historical writing.

One can argue, in fact, that just as there can be no explanation in history without a story, so too there can be no story without a plot by which to make of it a story of a particular kind. This is true even of the most self-consciously impressionistic historical account, such as Burckhardt’s loosely organized picture of the culture of the Italian Renaissance. One of Burckhardt’s explicitly stated purposes was to write history in such a way as to frustrate conventional expectations regarding the formal coherency of the historical field. He was seeking, in short, the same kind of effect as that sought by the writer of a satire. And indeed Burckhardt emplots his story of the Renaissance in the mode of the *satira*, or medley, which gives to his picture of that period of history its notoriously elusive quality as an “interpretation.” Late admirers of Burckhardt have praised him for his resolute resistance to any impulse to “overconceptualize” his pictures of the past or to over-plot the stories he tells about it. They have not recognized that such stern refusal to impose a form on the historical record is itself a poetic decision, the kind of decision underlying the satiric fiction, a decision which Burckhardt justified in his own mind by appeal to the historical solipsism of his philosophical master Schopenhauer. Burckhardt is not less “metahistorical” than Hegel; it is just that his brand of “metahistory” has not been recognized for the poetic fiction that it represents in the way that Hegel’s has been.<sup>28</sup>

28 Löwith (*Meaning in History*, p. 26) views Burckhardt as the first modern historian of undeniably classic stature to write history without concessions to those myths which had captivated all of the great “metahistorians” before him. But it would have been more accurate to have seen him as a classic historical skeptic. Burckhardt’s point of view is consistently ironic, his narrative techniques that of the satire. He calls his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* an “essay” and explicitly foregoes any effort to claim for it the status of an objective or scientific account of the period dealt with. So too Burckhardt abandons any effort to construct a diachronic narrative of events, structures, and processes that make up his account of the Renaissance. Materials are grouped together under very general categories or in terms of themes, but there is no effort to develop either an argument or a “story” in the individual sections of the book, and each section ends with a passage which seems to signal the author’s intention to frustrate the reader’s

The provision of a plot-structure, in order to endow the narrative account of "what happened in the past" with the attributes of a comprehensible process of development resembling the articulation of a drama or a novel, is one element in the historian's "interpretation" of the past. We may now consider another aspect of the historian's interpretative operations, that contained in the formal argument that he might offer (or that can be extrapolated from his parabases on the sequence of events represented in the narrative) to "explain" in nomological-deductive terms "why" the events developed as they appear to have done as given in the narrative account. It is often suggested that all such nomological-deductive arguments offered by the historian are either incomplete, flawed, or merely commonsensical, as compared with the paradigms of such explanations provided by true sciences such as physics and chemistry. And for our purposes, the general agreement between Idealists and Positivists over the generally unsatisfactory nature of all putative causal explanations offered by historians of human and social events, their common acceptance of their semi- or pseudoscientific character, is convenient. For it permits us to proceed immediately to the consideration of the "interpretative" element in all such putative "explanations."

Like practitioners of all fields not fully scientized, historians bring to their efforts to explain the past different paradigms of the form that a valid "explanation" may take. By a paradigm I mean the model of what a set of historical events will look like *once they have been explained*. One purpose of an explanation is to put in the place of a vague or imprecise perception of the relationships obtaining among phenomena in a given field a clear or precise perception. But the notion of what a clear and precise perception of a given domain of historical happening might look like differs from historian to historian. For some historians an explicated historical domain presents the aspect of a set of *dispersed* entities, each of which is clearly discernible as a unique particularity and the shared attribute of all being nothing other than their inhabitation of a single neighborhood of occurrences. In other words, explanation in this sense represents the result of an *analytical* operation which leaves the various entities of the field *unreduced* either to the status of general causal laws or to that of instances of general classificatory categories. For historians governed by this concep-

attempts to constitute it retrospectively in any cognitively significant terms. It is literally a *satura*, a medley or "stew," the aim of which can be construed as similar to that of the modern antinovel, that is to say to challenge the conventional "story" expectations that one normally brings to the consideration of a history.

tion of what an explanation should consist of, a field which *appears* at first glance to be a vague congeries of events is revealed at the end of the analysis to consist of a set of essentially autonomous particulars subsumable under no general rule, either of causation or of classificatory entailment.

For other historians, however, a fully explicated historical domain will appear as a field of *integrated* entities governed by a clearly specifiable structure of relationships, or syntax. Although *appearing* at first glance to be unrelated to one another, the individual entities in the field are revealed at the end of the analysis to be related to one another in the modality of cause-effect relationships (i.e., mechanistically) or in that of part-whole relationships (i.e., organicistically). For this kind of historian, "explanation" strives not for *dispersion*, but for *integration*, not for *analysis*, but for *synthesis*.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, we can distinguish among the various forms of explanation in historiography in two ways: on the basis of the *direction* that the analytical operation is presumed to take (towards dispersion or integration) and on the basis of the *paradigm* of the general aspect that the explicated set of phenomena will assume at the end of this operation. The difference is rather like that between those students of language interested primarily in assembling a lexicon and those concerned to determine the grammar and syntax of a specific system of usage.

Some historians delight in taking a field of historical happening that appears vague or obscure and simply sorting out the various entities within it so that their outlines seem more precise. They serve the function of magnifying glasses for their readers; when they have finished with their work, the particulars in the field appear clearer to the (mind's) eye. And this is their explanation of what was happening in the field. This desire to render the objects of perception clearer to the (mind's) eye is what appears to underlie the effort at palinogenesis inspiring much of Romantic historiography, and defended explicitly as a

29 The distinction drawn here, between dispersive and integrative strategies of explanation, is taken from Stephen C. Pepper, *World Hypotheses* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1966), pp. 142 ff, a sadly neglected analysis of the modalities of philosophical discourse. Pepper argues that there are basically only four "cognitively responsible" world hypotheses, each of which brings with it to philosophical debate its own theory of truth and conception of the tactics by which truth-statements can be adequately verified. He calls these four world hypotheses formism, organicism, mechanism, and contextualism. I have substituted the term "idiography" for his "formism," since it seemed more self-explanatory of its content for a discussion of the historiographical equivalents of Pepper's world hypotheses.



“scientific” method by Niebuhr, Michelet, and Carlyle.<sup>30</sup> The philosophical defense of this method was provided by Wilhelm Windelband, who called it “idiography.”<sup>31</sup> As a “scientific” method, of course, idiography provides the kinds of explanations met with in biology before Linnaeus or in chemistry before Lavoisier. The products of this kind of historiography have much the same aspect as the notes collected by a naturalist or by an anthropologist working in the field. Though with this difference: whereas both the naturalist and the anthropologist regard their observations as data to be worked up subsequently into generalizations about the structure of the field as a whole, the idiographic historian conceives of his work as finished when the phenomena he has observed have adequately been represented in precise descriptive prose.

To be sure, some idiographic historians insist that observation of the data must be followed by the effort to generalize about them, so as to offer the reader some insight into the possible “meaning” or “significance” of the data observed. These generalizations are not conceived, however, to function as hypotheses ultimately capable of being transformed into general theories of historical causation or even as a basis for a general schema of classification that might be applied to phenomena in other provinces of the historical field. The generalizations provided function rather as idiographic characterizations of discrete “contexts” for the individual events discerned in the specific field under study. This procedure yields those characterizations of “periods,” “trends,” “eras,” “movements,” and the like which permit us to conceive the whole historical process as a succession of discrete structures and processes, each with its own unique attributes, the significance of each of which is believed to reside in the “quality” or “atmosphere” of its richly varied texture.<sup>32</sup> When an “event” is set within its “context” by the method that Walsh has called “colligation,” the historian’s ex-

30 B. G. Niebuhr, the great Romantic historian of Rome, was among the first to conceive of history as *palingenesis*, especially of the folk spirit which was supposed to reside behind the documentary account. Michelet, in a famous comment on the differences between his work and that of Thierry and Guizot, explicitly calls his task as a historian that of “resurrection” of the dead voices of the lost generations—and especially of those who have been lost to “history” conceived as the story of the great men or aristocracies of the past. The most eloquent defense of this notion of historiography, conceived as a combination of poetry and science, is Thomas Carlyle’s essay “On History.” See *A Carlyle Reader*, ed. G. B. Tennyson (New York, 1969), pp. 57-60.

31 Wilhelm Windelband, “Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft,” *Präludiven* (Freiburg im Breisgau and Tübingen, 1884), II, 142-45.

32 Pepper, *World Hypotheses*, Ch. x.

planatory task is said, on this analysis, to be complete.<sup>33</sup> The movement towards *integration* of the phenomena is supposed to stop at the point at which a given context can be characterized in modestly general terms. The entities inhabiting the field under analysis still remain *dispersed*, but they are now *provisionally integrated* with one another as occupants of a shared “context” or, as it is sometimes said, are identified as objects bathed in a common “atmosphere.” This notion of explanation underlies the claims made for history as a kind of science by proponents of what Auerbach calls “atmospheric historicism.”<sup>34</sup> The explanation is complete when the “atmosphere” has been evoked in a successful prose representation. We may—following Pepper—call this explanatory strategy “contextualism.”

It can be seen that both of these kinds of historical explanation, idiography and contextualism, will tend to conceive the explanation given by the historian to be virtually indistinguishable from the “story” told in the course of the narration. Although contextualism is modestly integrative in its general aim, it does not encourage either an organicist synthesis of the whole field, in the manner of Hegel, or a mechanistic reduction of the field in terms of universal causal laws that might “explain” why the field has the peculiar characteristics that make it identifiable as a “context” of a particular sort, in the manner of Marx. Thus, for example, Burckhardt will continually suggest throughout his book on Renaissance culture that the entities observed by him are bathed in a common light and share the same context, which make them identifiable as specifically postmedieval and premodern phenomena. But he refuses to speculate on the “causes” of their being what they are and condemns the efforts of both Positivist and Idealist historians to further specify the reasons for their being *what* they are, *where* they are, *when* they are.<sup>35</sup>

33 By “colligation” Walsh intends that operation of “binding together” by which historians correlate events in order to provide understandings of their occurrence. This operation includes a determination of the ends or purposes of historical agents, identification of the “appropriate conceptions” or “ideas” that the events embody, and utilization of some “quasi-scientific” generalizations derived from experience and common sense. See *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, pp. 60-65. Cf. Mink, “Autonomy of Historical Understanding,” pp. 171-72, for a critique of this idea.

34 Cf. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, tr. Willard Trask (Princeton, 1968), pp. 473-77.

35 See, for example, the section on “Societies and Festivals” in *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, tr. S. G. C. Middlemore (London, 1960), and Burckhardt’s remarks on the causes of the “great innovation” which occurred during the Renaissance in *Judgments on History and Historians*, tr. Harry Zohn (Boston, 1958), pp. 64-66. Here Burckhardt’s conception of historical change as “metastasis” is explicitly set forth.

Needless to say, for historians with a mechanistic or organicist conception of the form that the explicated historical field must take, the products of both idiographic and contextualist efforts to "explain" what happened in the past are utterly unsatisfactory. The organicist insists on the necessity of relating the various "contexts" that can be perceived to exist in the historical record as parts to the whole which is history-in-general. He strives to identify the "principles" by which the different periods of history can be integrated into a single macrocosmic process of *development*. And this means that explanation, for him, must take the form of a synthesis in which each of the parts of the whole must be shown either to mirror the structure of the totality or to prefigure the form of either the end of the whole process or at least the latest phase of the process. Hegel, for example, explicitly prohibits the historian from speculating on the future. Historical wisdom, he says, can extend only to the comprehension of the historian's own present. But he conceives this specious present as the *culmination* of a millennial sequence of phases in a process that is to be regarded as *universally human*.<sup>36</sup>

Marx, by contrast, purports to be able to predict the specific form of the next phase of the whole process by a similarly organicist integration of all of the significant data of social history. But he claims to justify this predictive operation by virtue of the mechanistic reduction of those data to the status of functions of general laws of cause and effect that are universally operative throughout all of history. And it is the search for such laws, by which the events in the historical field can be reduced to the status of manifestations of impersonal causal agencies, that characterizes the analytical strategy of the mechanistic theory of historical explanation in general.<sup>37</sup> The mechanist, in short, does not see the elements of the historical field as being related in terms of part-whole relationships, but rather in terms of part-part relationships and in the modality of causality. This means, however, that the mechanist must distinguish among the parts so as to identify those that are "causes" and those that are "effects." For the mechanist, then, the historical field is considered to have been "explained" when he has satisfactorily distinguished between causal agencies and the effects of these agencies' operations, and then provided the necessary and sufficient conditions for their specific configurations at specific times and places within the whole process.

Thus, we can say that four different conceptions of "explanation"

36 See Pepper's discussion of Hegel's "organicism" in *World Hypotheses*, pp. 293 ff.

37 *Ibid.*, Ch. ix.

can be found in historiography, the idiographic, the contextualist, the organicist, and the mechanist, and that in a given historical work the mode of explanation actually favored by a specific historian ought to be identifiable and distinguishable from the narrative mode (or plot-structure) by appeal to which he has justified his telling of a *story of a particular kind*. But we can note a certain elective affinity between the mode of explanation and the mode of emplotment in historians of undeniably classic stature. For example, in Michelet the idiographic form of explanation is coupled with the plot-structure of the Romance; in Ranke the organicist explanation is coupled with the Comic plot-structure; in Tocqueville the mechanistic mode of explanation is used to complement and illuminate an essentially Tragic conception of the historical process; and in Burckhardt a contextualist explanatory mode appears in conjunction with a narrative form that is essentially satirical.

To be sure, these designations of modes of explanation and modes of emplotment are not exhaustive of the specific tactics used by these historians to gain certain kinds of restricted explanatory effects during the course of their expositions. Moreover, we need not suppose that the mode of emplotment favored by each historian *dictates* the mode of explanation that he will tend to favor. But, as I have suggested, there does appear to be an elective affinity between the modes of explanation and modes of emplotment used by each of them to gain a particular kind of “explanatory affect” or “interpretation” of the historical field under study. If, for example, as Frye suggests, we can take as one attribute of Tragedy the “epiphany of law” which is supposed to result from the kinds of resolutions that it deals in, then it is obvious that historians such as Tocqueville who prefigure the historical process in tragic terms will be inclined to conceive of the explanations they must offer of it in nomological (and usually mechanistic) terms. If Comedy is quintessentially the “drama of reconciliation,” then historians such as Ranke who approach history in these terms will be inclined to employ an organicist conception of truth in the formal arguments in which they explain why things happened as they did in the past. So too Michelet, writing in the mode of the Romance, favors idiographic explanatory strategies, while Burckhardt, writing in the mode of satire, utilizes a contextualist explanatory strategy to give to the historical field its explicated form.<sup>38</sup>

Let it be stressed again, that we are speaking here of the level on which the historian is seeking to grasp the nature of the whole field of

38 The characterizations of the plot-structures given here are taken from Frye, *Anatomy*, pp. 158-238, though they should be taken as little more than labels of the complex characterizations of them offered by him.

phenomena that is presented in his narrative, not that level on which he searches for the necessary conditions of a given event's occurrence within the field. A historian may decide that a decision to go to war was a result of policy choices of a given individual or group; and he can be said to have explained thereby why the war broke out at one time rather than another. But such "explanations" as these have to do with the constitution of the chronicle of events that still require "interpretation" in order to be transformed into a comprehensible drama of development by its emplotment as a particular story-form. And such explanations are to be distinguished from the general theory of significant relationships by which a field thus emplotted is provided with an "explanation" of why it has the form that it has in the narrative.

Thus far I have suggested that historians interpret their materials in two ways: by the choice of a plot-structure, which gives to their narratives a recognizable form, and by the choice of a paradigm of explanation, which gives to their arguments a specific shape, thrust, and mode of articulation. It is sometimes suggested that both of these choices are products of a third, more basic, interpretative decision: a moral or ideological decision. It is conventional, in fact, to use ideological designations of different "schools" of historical interpretation ("liberal" and "conservative" or "Whig" and "Tory") and to speak, for example, of a Marxist "approach" to history when one intends to cast doubt on a radical historian's "explanations" by relegating them to the status of mere "interpretations." Thus, hostile critics of a work like Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Buonaparte* can cite its manifestly polemical tone as evidence of its ideological purpose, and the radical ideology informing it can be cited as the reason for the satirical form taken by the narrative and the mechanistically reductive nature of its explanations of the events analyzed in it. Yet it is obvious that if we view Marx's great essay as what it is, namely, a masterful interpretation of a complex historical situation, it is difficult to assign priority to one or another of the three elements in it: the plot-structure of the farce, the mechanistic strategy of explanation, or the radical ideology by appeal to which the moral and political implications of the analysis are drawn for his readers.<sup>39</sup>

39 Marx himself of course refers to the events leading up to Louis Napoleon's *coup* as a "farce" and contrasts it to the "tragedy" of the Revolution of 1789. The tone is ironic throughout, but the point of view is anything but that. On the contrary, Marx has by this point in his career fully worked out the explanatory theories by which to disclose the true structure of the events under consideration. They are given their meaning by being set within the larger framework of the whole history of the bourgeoisie, which, in the *Communist Manifesto*, he characterizes as a "Promethean" tragic hero of the drama of history.

To be sure, we know that at the time Marx wrote this essay he had already worked out his own particular brand of radicalism and had fully articulated the theory of historical materialism by which he purported to justify, on scientific grounds, the specific tenets of his ideology. But we need not suppose that his emplotment of the events of 1848-51 in France in the mode of the satire was predetermined by the radical ideology which he had embraced, any more than we need suppose the reverse, that is to say, that his radicalism was a function of his perception of the essentially "absurd" nature of bourgeois society and its characteristic political activities. We need only note that historical accounts may or may not come attended by ideological interpretations of their "meanings" for the illumination of the historical situations in which they are composed. And, following the suggestion of Marx himself, we may further note that every historical account of any scope or profundity presupposes a specific set of ideological commitments in the very notions of "science," "objectivity," and "explanation" which inform it.

The sociologist of knowledge, Karl Mannheim, argued that the different positions on the ideological spectrum of modern, class-divided societies—liberal, conservative, radical, and anarchist (or nihilist)—each brought with it its own form of social time-consciousness and a particular notion of the extent to which historical processes were susceptible to, or resisted, rational analysis. And in a masterful essay, "Conservative Thought," as well as in his influential *Ideology and Utopia*, Mannheim demonstrated the ideological bases and implications of the Rankean ideal of an objective historiography which was established as the academic orthodoxy during the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup>

According to Mannheim, ideologies could be classified according to whether they were "situationally congruent" (i.e., generally accepting of the social status quo) or "situationally transcendent" (i.e., critical of the status quo and oriented towards its transformation or dissolution). Accordingly, the ideal of social science honored by devotees of the various ideologies would tend to be either contemplative or manipulative of their common object of study, which was not "history" per se or "the past" in general, but rather the *social matrix* experienced as an extension out of the past into the writer's own present. And what was true of ideologies in general was true of historiography specifically, given the

40 Karl Mannheim, "Conservative Thought," in *Essays in Sociology and Social Psychology*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (New York, 1953), pp. 74-164. See also *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, tr. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York, 1946), pp. 180-82, 206-15.



fact that history was in no sense a “science” but was rather a crucial element in every ideology striving to win the title of a science or posing as a “realistic” perspective on both the past and the present. Thus, even those historians who professed no particular ideological commitment and who suppressed the impulse to draw explicit ideological implications from their analysis of past societies could be said to be writing from within a specifiable ideological framework, by virtue of their adoption of a position vis-à-vis the form that a historical representation ought to take. Unlike the natural sciences, the human sciences are—as the late Lucien Goldmann was fond of stressing—inevitably impelled towards the adoption of ideological positions by the epistemological wagers that their practitioners are forced to make among contending theories of what an “objective” human science might look like. And, as Mannheim argued, a “contemplative” historiography is at least consonant with, when it is not a projection of, the ideological positions of the liberal and conservative, whether its practitioners are aware of this or not.

We may say, then, that in history—as in the human sciences in general—every representation of the past has specifiable ideological implications and that, therefore, we can discern at least four types of historical interpretation having their origins in different kinds of ideological commitment. Most of the classic historiographers of the nineteenth century drew these implications explicitly, but in ways that were not always consistent with the modes of emplotment used by them to give the form to their narratives or the explanatory strategies chosen to account for their representations of processes in particular ways. For example, although a professed liberal in his political views, Michelet emplots his history of France up to the Revolution in the mode of romance, which is actually more consonant with the ideological position of the anarchist. Moreover, Michelet’s explanatory strategy, which was that of idiography, was inconsistent with the liberal conviction of the rational comprehensibility of the historical process. And similarly for Tocqueville: he emplots history as tragedy and explains it by appeal to putative laws of historical development of a specifically mechanistic sort; but he resists drawing the radical implications of these interpretative strategies for the comprehension of the society of his own time. Instead, he tries to hold firm to the peculiar blend of liberal and conservative ideals that has commended him to later historians of both stripes as the possessor of a timeless “wisdom” in political analysis.

Historians of historical thought often lament the intrusion of such manifestly ideological elements into earlier historians’ efforts to portray

the past “objectively.” But more often they reserve such lamentation for the assessment of the work of historians representing ideological positions different from their own. As Mannheim noted, in the social sciences one man’s “science” is another’s “ideology.” This is especially so in historiography, where the label of “metahistorian” is usually attached to the work of anyone conceiving the tasks of history-writing differently from oneself.

Interpretation thus enters into historiography in at least three ways: aesthetically (in the choice of a narrative strategy), epistemologically (in the choice of an explanatory paradigm), and ethically (in the choice of a strategy by which the ideological implications of a given representation can be drawn for the comprehension of current social problems). And I have suggested that it is all but impossible, except for the most doctrinaire forms of history-writing, to assign priority to one or another of the three moments thus distinguished. This raises another question: is there yet another level of interpretation more basic than these?

Here it is tempting to take refuge in relativism, and to maintain that a given historical interpretation has its origins in purely personal factors peculiar to the historian being studied. Which would suggest, in turn, that there are as many types of interpretation in history as there are historians of manifest genius practicing the craft. But in fact an interesting quaternary pattern has reappeared in our analyses of the different levels on which interpretation enters into the construction of a given historical narrative. The analysis of plot-structures yields four types: Romance, Comedy, Tragedy, and Satire. That of explanatory strategies has produced four paradigms: idiographic, organicist, mechanistic, and contextualist. And the theory of ideology has produced four possibilities: anarchism, conservatism, radicalism, and liberalism. And although we have denied the possibility of assigning priority to one or another of the levels of interpretation discriminated by us, we believe that the types of interpretative strategies identified are structurally homologous with one another. Their homology can be graphically represented in the following table of correlations:

| <i>Mode of Emplotment</i> | <i>Mode of Explanation</i> | <i>Mode of Ideological Implication</i> |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Romance                   | Idiographic                | Anarchist                              |
| Comedy                    | Organicist                 | Conservative                           |
| Tragedy                   | Mechanistic                | Radical                                |
| Satire                    | Contextualist              | Liberal                                |

We do not suggest that these correlations necessarily appear in the

work of a given historian; in fact, the tension at the heart of every historical masterpiece is created in part by a conflict between a given modality of emplotment or explanation and the specific ideological commitment of its author. And often, shifts in tone or point of view which occur between a given historian's early and late work can be accounted for by his efforts to bring his historical representations in line with his ideology, or the reverse. For example, in the work of Tocqueville, the professed "liberalism" of his *Democracy in America* was in conflict with the Mechanistic mode of explanation and the "tragic" plot-structure which he used to account for the specific structure of the subject he was dealing with. By the time he had completed the first volume of *The Old Regime*, however, his latent "conservatism" had come to the fore, the "tragic" emplotment which he had preferred earlier had given place to a specifically "satirical" notion of the historical process in general, and his "mechanistic" explanatory strategy had yielded to a more specifically "contextualist" one. Similar kinds of transformations can be discerned in the corpora of historians such as Michelet, Marx, and Croce. And this suggests that the richness of their several historical masterpieces is provided by the sensitivity with which they entertain the possibilities of alternative strategies of interpretation during the course of their reflections on history. More doctrinaire historians, such as Ranke, Engels, Buckle, Taine, and to a certain extent Burckhardt, display no such sensitivity to alternative possibilities. Their "development" as historians consists for the most part of a refinement of a complex web of interpretative commitments made early in their careers.

What is true of individual historians is also true of historiography in general. Contending "schools" of historiography can be characterized by preferences for one or another combination of interpretative strategies, just as different generations within a given school can be said to represent variations on the combinations that are possible in the sets described above. The very possibility of such combinations engenders that "conceptual anarchy" which is characteristic of "fields of study" still unreduced to the status of a genuinely scientific discipline. Unlike physics after Newton or chemistry after Lavoisier, history remains a field of study without generally recognized images of the form that analyses must take, of the language in which findings are to be communicated, and of the techniques of generalization and verification to be used in establishing the truth of its findings.<sup>41</sup>

41 See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962), pp. 18-20, Ch. xiii.

It should be noted that the mark of a genuine scientization of a given field of study is the establishment in it of a technical terminology, its liberation from the vagaries of ordinary educated speech. Although the establishment of a technical terminology is not the cause of a discipline's scientization, it does signal agreement by investigators over what shall be considered a metaphysical and what a scientific problem. A metaphysical problem is that which cannot be formulated in the technical language employed by practitioners of the discipline to frame questions or provide answers to them. In a field such as history, then, the confusion of a metaphysical with a scientific question is not only possible but at some stage in a given investigation inevitable. And although professional historians claim to be able to distinguish between "proper history" on the one side and "metahistory" on the other, in fact the distinction has no adequate theoretical justification. Every "proper history" presupposes a "metahistory" which is nothing but the web of commitments which the historian makes in the course of his interpretation on the aesthetic, cognitive, and ethical levels differentiated above.

Are such commitments wholly arbitrary? The recurrence of the quaternary pattern in the various levels on which interpretation is possible suggests that it is not. Moreover, if the correlations between modes of emplotment, of explanation, and of ideological implication which we have made are valid, we must entertain the possibility of the grounding of these modes in some more basic level of consciousness. The difficulty of identifying this level of consciousness, however, is manifest. It arises from the fact that in psychology, as in history, there are a number of contending schools of interpretation, with no one of them able to claim definitively the title of a genuine science of mind. But this difficulty may be avoided, we think, by concentration on the linguistic basis of all fields of study as yet still unreduced to the status of a science. We can move the problem back to a ground prior to that on which the emotive, cognitive, and moral faculties can be presumed to function. This ground is that of language itself which, in areas of study such as history, can be said to operate *tropologically* in order to prefigure a field of perception in a particular modality of relationships. If we distinguish between those areas of study in which specific terminological systems, with stipulated meanings for lexical elements and explicit rules of grammar and syntax, have been constituted as orthodoxy—as in physics with its dependency upon mathematical language and a logic of identity—and those areas of study in which the problem is still to produce such a system of stipulated meanings and syntactical rules, we can see that history certainly falls into the latter field. This means that historiographical disputes will tend to turn, not only upon the matter of

what are the facts, but also upon that of their meaning. But meaning in turn will be construed in terms of the possible modalities of natural language itself, and specifically in terms of the dominant tropological strategies by which unknown or unfamiliar phenomena are provided with meanings by different kinds of metaphorical appropriations. If we take the dominant tropes as four: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, it is obvious that in language itself, in its generative or prepoetic aspect, we might possibly have the basis for the generation of those types of explanation that inevitably arise in any field of study not yet disciplined in the sense of being liberated from the conceptual anarchy that seems to signal their distinctively prescientific phases.

Following a suggestion of Kenneth Burke, we may say that the four "master tropes" deal in relationships that are experienced as inhering within or among phenomena, but which are in reality relationships existing between consciousness and a world of experience calling for a provision of its meaning.<sup>42</sup> Metaphor, whatever else it does, explicitly asserts a similarity in a difference and, at least implicitly, a difference in a similarity. We may call this the provision of a meaning in terms of equivalence or identity. We may then distinguish metonymy and synecdoche, as secondary forms of metaphor, in terms of their further specification of either difference or similarity in the phenomena originally identified in metaphorical terms. In metonymy, for example, the reduction of the whole to the part presupposes the possibility of distinguishing between the whole and the parts comprising it, but in such a

42 See Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), Appendix D, "Four Master Tropes," pp. 503-17. The whole question of the nature of the tropes is difficult to deal with, and I must confess my hesitancy in suggesting that they are the key to the understanding of the problem of interpretation in such proto-scientific fields as history. I am prompted to persevere in this belief, however, not only by Burke's work, but also by the example of Vico. In *The New Science*, Vico suggests (although he does not make the point explicitly) that the forms of consciousness given by a given age in a culture's history correspond to the forms of consciousness given by language itself to human efforts to comprehend the world. Thus, the forms of science, art, religion, politics, etc., of the four ages of a culture's evolution (the ages of gods, heroes, men, and of decline, or *ricorso*) correspond exactly to the four stages of consciousness reflected in the dominance of a given trope: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, in that order. See *The New Science*, tr. Bergin and Fisch, pars. 400-10, pp. 127-32, and pars. 443-46, pp. 147-50. See also the interesting correlations of mental disorders and linguistic habits made by Roman Jakobson, on the basis of the contrast between "metaphorical" and "metonymic" speech, in his *Essais de linguistique generale*, tr. Nicolas Ruwet (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1963), especially the essay "Le langage commun des linguistes et des anthropologues," pp. 25-67. Jakobson expands on these correlations, for purposes of literary criticism in "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (New York and London, 1960), pp. 350-77.

way as to assign priority to parts for the ascription of meanings to any putative whole appearing to consciousness. In synecdoche, by contrast, the similiar distinction between parts and the whole is made only for the purpose of identifying the whole as a totality that is qualitatively different from the parts that appear to make it up.

Burke argues that metonymic usage is *reductive*, while synecdochic is *representative*.<sup>43</sup> The important point is that in metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche alike language provides us with models of the *direction* that thought itself might take in its effort to provide meaning to areas of experience not already regarded as being cognitively secured by either common sense, tradition, or science. And we can see that in a field of study such as history, “interpretation” might be regarded as what Foucault has called a “formalisation” of the linguistic mode in which the phenomenal field was originally prepared for the identification of the entities inhabiting it and the determination of their interrelationships.<sup>44</sup> A putative science construed in the mode of metaphor, for example, would be governed by the search for similitudes among any two phenomena in the field, the object being of course to catalogue the specific attributes of any given phenomenon by noting whatever similarities it had to a host of other phenomena manifestly different from it at first glance. We would suggest that this is the linguistic basis of that mode of explanation met with in historiography which we have called “idiography.”

Metonymy, being reductive in its operations, would provide a model of that form of explanation which we have called mechanistic, inasmuch as the latter is characterized by an apprehension of the historical field as a complex of part-part relationships and by the effort to comprehend that field in terms of the laws that bind one phenomenon to another as a cause to an effect. Synecdoche, by contrast, would sanction a movement in the opposite direction, towards integration of all apparently particular phenomena into a whole, the quality of which was such as to justify belief in the possibility of understanding the particular as a microcosm of a macrocosmic totality, which is precisely the aim of all organicist systems of explanation.

This brings us to the fourth trope, irony, in many ways the most problematical. Burke has suggested that irony is inherently *dialectical*, and that we might consider it the topological ground of a specifically dialectic-

43 Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, pp. 505-10.

44 See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1970), pp. 298-300.



tical mode of thought.<sup>45</sup> I am not sure this is the case. To be sure, irony sanctions the ambiguous, and possibly even the ambivalent, statement. It is a kind of metaphor, but one that surreptitiously signals a denial of the assertion of similitude or difference contained in the literal sense of the proposition, or at least sets a crucial qualification on it. “He is all *heart*” contains a metonymy within a synecdoche; “He is *all heart*,” if delivered in the right tone of voice, contains an irony on top of a synecdoche. What is involved here is a kind of attitude towards knowledge itself which is implicitly critical of all forms of metaphorical identification, reduction, or integration of phenomena. In short, irony is the linguistic strategy underlying and sanctioning skepticism as an explanatory tactic, satire as a mode of emplotment, and either agnosticism or cynicism as a moral posture.<sup>46</sup>

If these correlations are at all plausible, it follows that “interpretation” in historical thought may very well consist of the projection, on the cognitive, aesthetic, and moral (or ideological) levels of conceptualization, of the various tropes authorizing prefigurations of the phenomenal field in natural languages in general. In short, “interpretation” in historical thought would consist of the formalization of the phenomenal field originally constituted by language itself on the basis of a dominant tropological wager. If this were the case, we could account for the “classic” quality of the four recognized “masters” of nineteenth-century historical thought—Michelet, Tocqueville, Ranke, and Burckhardt—in terms of the consistency with which each carries through the explanation, emplotment, and ideological reduction of the historical field in terms of the linguistic strategy of prefiguration represented by the various tropes. And in this sense *our* interpretation of *their* work would consist of the explication of the tropological wager buried at the heart of their strategies of explanation, emplotment, and ideological implication respectively. If this interpretative strategy were correct, we could then say that their thought represents the working out of the possibilities of explanation, emplotment, and ideological implication contained in the linguistic endowment of their age: metaphorical (Michelet), metonymic (Tocqueville), synecdochic (Ranke), and ironic (Burckhardt) respectively.

But to suggest this method of analysis for the comprehension of the different interpretative strategies met with in historiography is to pose yet another question, one with which we cannot deal in this essay. This question has to do with the validity of the tropological theory of

45 Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, pp. 511-16.

46 Cf. Vico on irony, in *The New Science*, par. 408, p. 131.

poetic language itself. Are the tropes intrinsic to natural language? And if so, do they function to provide models of representation and explanation within any field of study not yet raised to the status of a genuine science? Further: is what we mean by a "science" simply a field of study in which one or the other of the tropes has achieved the status of paradigm for the linguistic protocol in which the scientist is constrained to formulate his questions and encode his answers to them? These questions must await the further researches of psychologists and linguists into the generative aspect of language and speech. But it does seem possible to me that what we mean by "interpretation" can be clarified significantly by further analysis of the modalities of speech in which a given field of perception is rendered provisionally comprehensible by being "seized" in language.

In closing this essay, I should like to return to a brief consideration of the theories of historical interpretation advanced by the four nineteenth-century philosophers of history alluded to in my introduction. I noted that Hegel, Droysen, Nietzsche, and Croce all identified four possible strategies by which historians might interpret their materials. And although they name them by their own particular systems of terminology, it is obvious that each conceives historical interpretation to span a spectrum of possibilities whose poles are constituted by a mode of consciousness that is essentially metaphorical, on the one side, and one that is predominantly ironic, on the other. Hegel's distinctions between Universal, Pragmatic, Critical, and Conceptual historiography are drawn on the basis of the differences between a historical consciousness that is "naive" at one extreme and "sentimental" at the other. The intermediary stages can be classified as metonymic and synecdochic respectively, that is to say, reductive and representative (in Burke's terminology) in their general orientation as interpretative strategies. Droysen's categories (Psychological, Causal, Conditional, and Ethical) are, in his descriptions of them, similarly tropological at base. And the same can be said of Nietzsche's fourfold system of classification (Antiquarian, Monumental, Critical, and Superhistorical). Of the four philosophers mentioned, however, Croce represents the clearest case of a tropological analysis of historical interpretation masquerading as a philosophical analysis. His four "schools" of historical thought (Romantic, Positivistic, Idealistic, and Critical) resolve into forms of consciousness which are manifestly metaphorical, metonymic, synecdochic, and ironic respectively as he characterizes them.

It is probably no accident that each of these theorists was especially sensitive to the necessity of identifying the poetic and rhetorical ele-

ments in historiography. Hegel, Nietzsche, and Croce, in fact, can be characterized as philosophers of language in a specific sense. Croce especially moved progressively from his study of the epistemological bases of historical knowledge to a position in which he sought to subsume history under a general concept of art. His theory of art, in turn, was construed as a "science of expression and general linguistics" (the subtitle of his *Aesthetics*). In his analysis of the bases in speech of all possible modes of comprehending reality, he came closest to grasping the essentially tropological nature of interpretation in general. He was kept from formulating this near perception, most probably, by his own "ironic" suspicion of system in any human science.

Nonetheless, both the quaternary form of these analyses of the modalities of historical interpretation and the specific characterizations of them by the theorists mentioned provide the bases for further inquiry into the tropological origins of the kinds of interpretation met with in fields of study such as history. Whether such an inquiry would yield an adequate understanding of the operations of such fields of study, I cannot say. But it would at least remove controversy from the ground on which conflicting ideological commitments come garbed as methodologies and alternative paradigms of explanation are presented as the sole possible forms that a "science of history" may take.

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