

## THE BURDEN OF HISTORY

HAYDEN V. WHITE

For better than a century many historians have found it useful to employ a Fabian tactic against critics in related fields of intellectual endeavor. The tactic works like this: when criticized by social scientists for the softness of his method, the crudity of his organizing metaphors, or the ambiguity of his sociological and psychological presuppositions, the historian responds that history has never claimed the status of a pure science, that it depends as much upon intuitive as upon analytical methods, and that historical judgments should not therefore be evaluated by critical standards properly applied only in the mathematical and experimental disciplines. All of which suggests that history is a kind of art. But when reproached by literary artists for his failure to probe the more arcane strata of human consciousness and his unwillingness to utilize contemporary modes of literary representation, the historian falls back upon the view that history is after all a *semi-science*, that historical data do not lend themselves to “free” artistic manipulation, and that the form of his narratives is not a matter of choice, but is required by the nature of historical materials themselves.

This tactic has a long record of success in disarming critics of history; and it has allowed historians to claim occupancy of an epistemologically neutral middle ground that supposedly exists between art and science. Thus, historians sometimes argue that it is only in history that art and science meet in harmonious synthesis. According to this view, the historian not only mediates between past and present; he also has the special task of joining together two modes of comprehending the world that would normally be unalterably separated.

But there is mounting evidence that this Fabian tactic has outlived its usefulness, and that the position which it had formerly secured for the historian among the various intellectual disciplines has been placed in serious jeopardy. Among contemporary historians one senses a growing suspicion that the tactic functions primarily to block serious consideration of the more significant advances in literature, social science, and philosophy in the twentieth century. And the opinion seems to be growing among non-historians that, far from

being the desirable mediator between art and science that he claims to be, the historian is the irredeemable enemy of both. In short, everywhere there is resentment over what appears to be the historian's bad faith in claiming the privileges of both the artist and the scientist while refusing to submit to critical standards currently obtaining in either art or science.

There are two general causes of this resentment. One has to do with the nature of the historical profession itself. History is perhaps the conservative discipline par excellence. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, most historians have affected a kind of willful methodological naiveté. Originally this naiveté served a good purpose; it protected the historian from the tendency to embrace the monistic explanatory systems of a militant idealism in philosophy and an equally militant positivism in science. But this suspicion of system has become a sort of conditioned response among historians which has led to a resistance throughout the entire profession to almost any kind of critical self-analysis. Moreover, as history has become increasingly professionalized and specialized, the ordinary historian, wrapped up in the search for the elusive document that will establish him as an authority in a narrowly defined field, has had little time to inform himself of the latest developments in the more remote fields of art and science. Many historians are not aware, therefore, that the radical disjunction between art and science, which their self-arrogated roles as mediators between them presupposes, may perhaps be no longer justified.

Here is the second general cause of the current hostility towards history. That supposedly neutral middle ground between art and science which many nineteenth-century historians occupied with such self-confidence and pride of possession has dissolved in the discovery of the common constructivist character of both artistic and scientific statements. Most contemporary thinkers do not concur in the conventional historian's assumption that art and science are essentially different ways of comprehending the world. It now seems fairly clear that the nineteenth-century belief in the radical dissimilarity of art to science was a consequence of a misunderstanding fostered by the romantic artist's fear of science and the positivistic scientist's ignorance of art. No doubt both the romantic artist's fear of positivistic science and the positivistic scientist's disdain for romantic art were justified in the intellectual atmosphere in which they were born. But modern criticism — mostly as a result of advances made by psychologists in the investigation of the human synthesizing faculties — has achieved a clearer understanding of the operations by which the artist expresses his vision of the world and the scientist frames his hypotheses about it. As the implications of this achievement become more fully recognized, the need for a mediating agent between art and science disappears; at least it is no longer obvious that the historian is especially qualified to play the mediating role.

Thus, historians of this generation must be prepared to face the possibility that the prestige which their profession enjoyed among nineteenth-century intellectuals was a consequence of determinable cultural forces. They must be prepared to entertain the notion that history, as currently conceived, is a kind of historical accident, a product of a specific historical situation, and that, with the passing of the misunderstandings that produced that situation, history itself may lose its status as an autonomous and self-authenticating mode of thought. It may well be that the most difficult task which the current generation of historians will be called upon to perform is to expose the historically conditioned character of the historical discipline, to preside over the dissolution of history's claim to autonomy among the disciplines, and to aid in the assimilation of history to a higher kind of intellectual inquiry which, because it is founded on an awareness of the *similarities* between art and science, rather than their differences, can be properly designated as neither.

## I

It should not be necessary to trace again the main lines of the quarrel between social science and history which has exercised the philosophically self-conscious practitioners of each during this century. It is an old controversy that goes back to the early nineteenth century. But it may be worthwhile to recall that the quarrel has achieved a kind of resolution which was not possible in the nineteenth century and that, as currently pursued, the quarrel transcends the limits of any mere discussion of method.

In the first place, during the nineteenth century science had not attained to the hegemonic position among the learned disciplines that it enjoys today. Contemporary philosophers of science are clearer about the nature of scientific explanations, and scientists themselves have succeeded in gaining that mastery over the physical world of which they could only dream throughout most of the last century. Thus, in our time, a statement such as that made by the late Ernst Cassirer, that "There is no second power in our modern world which may be compared with scientific thought," can be accepted as simple fact; it cannot be dismissed as mere rhetoric in the dispute for primacy among the learned disciplines, as it might have been in the nineteenth century. Today, science is recognized, as Cassirer went on to say, as "the summit and consummation of all our human activities, the last chapter in the history of mankind, and the most important subject of a philosophy of man. . . . We may dispute concerning the results of science or its first principles, but its general function seems to be unquestionable. It is science that gives us assurance of a common world."

The dazzling triumphs of science in our time have not only spurred investi-

gators of social processes in their efforts to construct a science of society similar to the science of nature; they have also sharpened their hostility toward history. The most striking feature of *current* thought about history by many practitioners of the social sciences is the underlying implication that the conventional historian's conceptions of history are at once a symptom and a cause of a potentially fatal cultural illness. Thus the criticism of history by responsible social scientists takes on a moral dimension. To many of them the destruction of the conventional historian's conception of history is a necessary stage in the construction of a true science of society, and an essential component of the therapy which they will ultimately propose as a way of leading a sick society back to the path of enlightenment and progress.

In their devaluation of the conventional historian's approach to historical problems, contemporary social scientists are sustained by the course taken by the current debate among philosophers over the nature of historical investigation and the epistemological status of historical explanations. Significant contributions to this debate have been made by continental thinkers, but it has been developed with extraordinary intensity in the English-speaking world since 1942, when Carl Hempel published his essay on "The Function of General Laws in History."

It would be untrue to suggest that contributors to this debate have arrived at any kind of general agreement about the nature of historical explanation. But it must be admitted that the course of the debate thus far is nothing if not disconcerting to anyone who shares Cassirer's evaluation of the hegemonic role of the physical sciences among the learned disciplines, and at the same time values the study of history. For a significant number of philosophers seem to have decided that history is either a third-order form of science, related to the social sciences as natural history was once related to the physical sciences, or that it is a second-order form of art, the epistemological value of which is questionable, the aesthetic worth of which is uncertain. These philosophers seem to have concluded that, if there is any such thing as a hierarchy of the sciences, history falls somewhere between Aristotelian physics and Linnaean biology — which is to say that it may have a certain interest for collectors of exotic world-views and debased mythologies, but not very much to contribute to the establishment of that "common world" spoken of by Cassirer as finding its daily confirmation in science.

## II

Now, the expulsion of history from the first rank of the sciences would not be quite so unnerving if a good deal of twentieth-century literature did not manifest a hostility toward the historical consciousness even more marked

than anything found in the scientific thought of our time. It could even be argued that one of the distinctive characteristics of contemporary literature is its underlying conviction that the historical consciousness must be obliterated if the writer is to examine with proper seriousness those strata of human experience which it is *modern art's* peculiar purpose to disclose. This conviction is so widespread that the historian's claim to be an artist appears pathetic when it does not appear merely ludicrous.

The modern writer's hostility towards history is evidenced most clearly in the practice of using the historian to represent the extreme example of repressed sensibility in the novel and theatre. Writers who have used historians in this way include Gide, Ibsen, Malraux, Aldous Huxley, Hermann Broch, Wyndham Lewis, Thomas Mann, Jean-Paul Sartre, Camus, Pirandello, Kingsley Amis, Angus Wilson, Elias Canetti, and Edward Albee — to mention only major or currently fashionable writers. The list could be extended considerably if one included the names of authors who have implicitly condemned the historical consciousness by suggesting the essential contemporaneity of all significant human experience. Virginia Woolf, Proust, Robert Musil, Italo Svevo, Gottfried Benn, Ernst Jünger, Valéry, Yeats, Kafka, and D. H. Lawrence, all reflect the currency of the conviction voiced by Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, that history is the "nightmare" from which Western man must awaken if humanity is to be served and saved.

True, in many modern novels and plays the scientist appears as the anti-type to the artist even more often than the historian does. But the writer usually displays some affection and even a certain willingness to forgive, that is not extended to the historian characters. Whereas the scientist is most often shown as one who betrays the spirit out of a positive commitment to something else, such as a Faustian desire to control the world, or a need to plumb the secrets of sheer material process, the historian by contrast is usually portrayed as the enemy within the walls, as one who counterfeits pious attitudes of respect for the spirit only the better to subvert the spirit's claims on the creative individual. In short, the charge levelled against the historian by modern writers is also a moral one: but whereas the scientist accuses him only of a failure of method or intellect, the artist indicts him for a failure of sensibility or will.

The specifications of the indictment and the tactics by which it is prosecuted have not changed very much since Nietzsche set the pattern nearly a century ago. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) Nietzsche set art over against all forms of abstractive intelligence as life against death for humanity. He included history among the many possible perversions of the Apollonian faculties of man and specifically charged it with having contributed to the destruction of the mythic fundamentals of both individual and communal selfhood. Two years later, in "The Use and Abuse of History" (1874), he sharpened his concep-

tion of the opposition between the artistic and historical imaginations and claimed that wherever the “eunuchs” in the “harem of history” flourished, art must necessarily perish. “The unrestrained historical sense,” he wrote, “pushed to its logical extreme, uproots the future, because it destroys illusions and robs existing things of the only atmosphere in which they can live.”

Nietzsche hated history even more than he hated religion. History promoted a debilitating voyeurism in men, made them feel that they were latecomers to a world in which everything worth doing had already been done, and thereby undermined that impulse to heroic exertion that might give a peculiarly human, if only transient, meaning to an absurd world. The sense of history was the product of a faculty which distinguished man from the animal, namely memory, also the source of conscience. History had to be “seriously ‘hated’,” Nietzsche concluded, “as a costly and superfluous luxury of the understanding,” if human life itself were not to die in the senseless cultivation of those vices which a false morality, based on memory, induced in men.

Whatever else, for good or evil, the next generation learned from Nietzsche, it took up his hostility towards history as practiced by late nineteenth-century academic historians with a vengeance. But Nietzsche was not alone responsible for the decline of history’s authority among *fin de siècle* artists. Similar indictments, more or less explicit, can be found in writers as different in temperament and purpose as George Eliot, Ibsen, and Gide.

In *Middlemarch*, published in the same year as *The Birth of Tragedy*, Eliot used the encounter between Dorthea Brooke and Mr. Casaubon to provide a suitably English indictment of the perils of antiquarianism. Miss Brooke, a Victorian virgin of assured income who desires to do just one self-transcending thing in her life, sees in Mr. Casaubon, twenty-five years her senior, “a living Bossuet, whose work would reconcile complete knowledge with devoted piety.” And in spite of their difference in age, she resolves to marry him and dedicate her life to the service of his proposed historical study of the religious systems of the world. But during her honeymoon in Rome, her illusions are shattered. There Casaubon reveals his incapacity to respond to the past which lives about him in the monuments of the city, and, moreover, his inability to bring his own intellectual labors to completion in the present. “With his taper stuck before him,” the author says of Casaubon, “he forgot the absence of windows, and in bitter manuscript remarks on other men’s notions about the solar deities, he had become indifferent to the sunlight.” In the end, Dorthea denies her obligations to Casaubon the scholar and marries young Ladislaw the artist, achieving her escape from the incubus of history thereby. George Eliot does not worry over the matter, but the gist of her thought is clear: artistic insight and historical learning are opposed, and the qualities of the responses to life which they respectively evoke are mutually exclusive.

Ibsen, writing in the next decade, is characteristically more concerned and more explicit about the limitations of a culture which values the past more than the present. Hedda Gabler suffers under the same burden as Dorthea Brooke: the incubus of the past, a surfeit of history — compounded by, or reflected in, a pervasive fear of the future. Upon their return from their honeymoon, Hedda and her husband George Tesman are welcomed by Tesman's aunt, who hints at the delights which their wedding-tour must have afforded them. To this George responds: "Well, for me it has been a sort of tour of research as well. I have had to do so much grubbing among old records — and to read no end of books too, Auntie."

Tesman, of course, is a historian, a younger Mr. Casaubon, writing the definitive study of domestic industries in Brabant during the Middle Ages. His labors consume his by no means ample supply of human affection; so much, in fact, that much of Hedda's restlessness can be said to have its origin in George's devotion to domestic industries of the past when he might be showing more domestic industry in the present. "You should just try it," Hedda shrieks at one point: "To hear nothing but the history of civilization, morning, noon, and night!"

Not that the cause of Hedda's complex dissatisfactions can be localized within such a limited range as the merely sexual. She is the victim of a whole web of repressions that are endemic to bourgeois society, only one of which is represented by Tesman's use of the past to avoid the problems of the present. Nonetheless, Hedda's growing contempt for her husband centers on his ascetic devotion to history, the realm of the dead and dying, which mirrors and reinforces Hedda's fear of an unknown future, symbolized by the child taking shape within her.

Tesman's rival is Eilert Lövberg, also an historian, but in the grander, Hegelian style. He is a philosopher of history, whose book, "dealing with the march of civilization — in broad outline, as it were," inspires in Hedda the hope that his vision may afford a possible release from the narrow world circumscribed by Tesman's fractured imagination. Ibsen means us to see Lövberg as a man of talent and potential creative effort. He is composing a work on civilization that will undermine, rather than sustain, conventional morality, one that will tell a nobler truth than the comfortable half-truth upon which his first book and his youthful reputation are based. But as the play develops, Hedda comes to hate him; she gains possession of his manuscript, destroys it, and causes Lövberg's suicide. The destruction of the manuscript is, on the one hand, an act of personal revenge on Lövberg for his affair with Hedda's rival, Mrs. Elvsted. But on the other it is a symbolic repudiation of that "civilization" of which both Tesman and Lövberg, each in his own way, are thoughtless devotees. In the end, Hedda is threatened with subjection to Judge Brack, another custodian of tradition, which leads finally to her own suicide. And in

the last scene, Tesman and Mrs. Elvsted, survivors of the tragedy, dedicate themselves to the life-long task of editing Lövberg's *Nachlass*, thus indicating that neither has learned anything from the tragic events to which they might have borne choric witness. Tesman composes his own epitaph when he says: "Arranging other people's papers is just the work for me." Ibsen means us to see this as the scholar's equivalent of Judge Brack's philistine comment on Hedda's suicide: "People don't do such things."

In Gide's *The Immoralist* (1902) the revolt against historical consciousness is even more explicit, the opposition between art's response to the living present and history's worship of the dead past more brutally drawn. The protagonist of the work, Michel, suffers from a sickness which combines all of the symptoms ascribed by Ibsen to the various characters of *Hedda Gabler*. Michel is at once a philistine, a historian, and increasingly, as the novel progresses, a philosopher of history. But his role as philosopher is earned only after he has suffered through his roles as philistine and as historian. And it is a purely temporary role, since it brings with it the realization that history, like civilization itself, must be transcended if the needs of life are to be served.

Michel's tuberculosis is just one manifestation of a general fear of living, which shows itself psychologically as an obsessive concern with dead cultures and dead forms of life. Thus, after his recovery from his physical illness has begun, Michel discovers that he has lost all interest in the past. He says:

When . . . I wanted to start my work again and immerse myself once more in a minute study of the past, I discovered that something had, if not destroyed, at any rate modified my pleasure in it . . . and this something was the feeling of the present. The history of the past had now taken on for me the immobility, the terrifying fixity of the nocturnal shadows in the little courtyard of Biskra — the immobility of death. In the old days, I had taken pleasure in this very fixity, which enabled my mind to work with precision; the facts of history all appeared to me like specimens in a museum, or rather like plants in a herbarium, permanently dried, so that it was easy to forget they had once upon a time been juicy with sap and alive with sun. . . . I ended by avoiding ruins . . . I ended by despising the learning that had at first been my pride . . . In as much as I was a specialist, I appeared to myself as senseless; in as much as I was a man, did I know myself at all?

And so, when he returns to Paris to lecture on late Latin Culture, Michel turns his awareness of the present against this debilitating sense of the past:

I depicted artistic culture as welling up in a whole people, like a secretion, which is at first a sign of plethora, of a superabundance of health, but which afterwards stiffens, hardens, forbids the perfect contact of mind with nature, hides under the persistent appearance of life a diminution of life, turns into an outside sheath, in which the cramped mind languishes and pines, in which at last it dies. Finally, pushing my thought to its logical conclusions, I showed culture, born of life, as the destroyer of life.

But soon even this Lövbergian use of the past to destroy the past loses its attraction for Michel, and he gives up his academic career to seek communion with those dark forces which history had obscured and culture had weakened in him. The problematical conclusion of the book suggests that Gide wants us to see Michel as permanently crippled by his early devotion to a historicized culture, a living confirmation of the Nietzschean dictum that history banishes instinct and turns men into "shades and abstractions."

### III

In the decade before the First World War this hostility towards the historical consciousness and the historian gained wide currency among intellectuals in every country of Western Europe. Everywhere there was a growing suspicion that Europe's feverish rummaging among the ruins of its past expressed less a sense of firm control over the present than an unconscious fear of a future too horrible to contemplate. Even before the nineteenth century had ended, a great historian, Jacob Burckhardt, had foreseen the death of European culture and had responded by abandoning history as practiced in the academy, frankly proclaiming the necessity of its transformation into art but refusing to enter the public lists in the defense of his heresy. Schopenhauer had taught him not only the futility of historical inquiry of the conventional sort, but the folly of public exertion as well. Another great Schopenhauerian, Thomas Mann, in his novel *Buddenbrooks* (1901), had located the cause of this sense of imminent degeneration in the hyperconsciousness of an advanced middle-class culture. The aesthetic sensitivity of Hanno Buddenbrooks is at once the finest product of his bourgeois family's history and the sign of its disintegration. Meanwhile, philosophers such as Bergson and Klages argued that the conception of historical time itself, which bound men to antiquated institutions, ideas, and values, was the cause of the sickness.

Among social scientists the hostility towards history was less marked. Sociologists, for example, continued to search for some way of uniting history and science, the study of process and the study of structure, in new disciplines, the so-called "sciences of the spirit," in accordance with the program mapped out by Wilhelm Dilthey and executed by Max Weber in Germany and by Emile Durkheim in France. Neo-Kantians like Wilhelm Windelband, on the other hand, sought to distinguish between history and science, designating history as a kind of art which, even though it could not provide *laws* of social change, still offered valuable insights into the totality of possible human experiences. Croce went further, arguing that history was a form of art but at the same time a master discipline, the sole possible basis for a social wisdom adequate to the needs of contemporary Western man.

The First World War did much to destroy what remained of history's prestige among both artists and social scientists; for the war seemed to confirm what Nietzsche had maintained two generations earlier. History, which was supposed to provide some sort of training for life, which was supposed to be "philosophy teaching by examples," had done little to prepare men for the coming of the war; it had not taught them what would be expected of them during the war; and when the war was over historians seemed incapable of rising above narrow partisan loyalties and making sense of the war in any significant way. When they did not merely parrot the current slogans of the governments regarding the criminal intent of the enemy, historians tended to fall back on the view that no one had really wanted the war at all; it had "just happened."

Such may well have been the case, of course; but it seemed less an explanation than an admission that *no* explanation, at least on historical grounds, was possible. Whether the same could have been said of other disciplines was unimportant. Historical studies, if we include classics under that term, had formed the center of humanistic and social scientific studies before the war; and it was therefore natural that they should become a prime target of those who had lost faith in man's capacity to make sense out of his situation when the war had ended. Paul Valéry expressed the new anti-historicist attitude best when he wrote:

History is the most dangerous product evolved from the chemistry of the intellect. . . . History will justify anything. It teaches precisely nothing, for it contains everything and furnishes examples of everything. . . . Nothing was more completely ruined by the last war than the pretension to foresight. But it was not from any lack of knowledge of history, surely?

To the more desperate spiritual casualties of the War neither past nor future could provide orientation for specifically human actions in the present. As the German poet Gottfried Benn put it: "A wise man is ignorant/of change and development/his children and his children's children/are not part of his world." And he drew from this radically ahistorical conception of the world its inevitable ethical consequences:

I am struck by the thought that it might be more revolutionary and worthier of a vigorous and active man to teach his fellow man this simple truth: You are what you are and you will never be different; this is, was, and always will be your life. He who has money, lives long; he who has authority, can do no wrong; he who has might, establishes right. Such is history! *Ecce historia!* Here is the present; take of its body, eat, and die.

In Russia, where the Revolution of 1917 had raised with especial immediacy the problem of the relationship of the new to the old, M. O. Gershenson wrote to the historian V. I. Ivanov of his hope that the violence of the time would usher in a new and more creative interaction between "naked man and

the naked earth." "For me," he wrote, "there is a prospect of happiness in a Lethan bath that would erase the memory of all religions and philosophical systems . . ." — in short, relieve him of the burden of history.

This anti-historical attitude underlay both the Nazism and the Existentialism that would constitute the legacy of the 'thirties to our time. Both Spengler, in so many ways the progenitor of Nazism, and Malraux, the recognized father of French Existentialism, taught that history was valuable only in so far as it destroyed, rather than established, responsibility towards the past. Even that transparent humanist, Ortega y Gasset, writing in 1923, shared their belief that the past was *only* a burden. "Our institutions, like our theatres," he wrote in *The Modern Theme* (1923), "are anachronisms. We have neither the courage to break resolutely with such devitalized accretions of the past nor can we in any way adjust to them." And during the mid-'thirties, in a work dedicated to a victim of Nazi oppression, he confessed that the only lesson that history had taught him was that: "Man is an infinitely plastic entity of which one may make what one will, precisely because of itself it is nothing save only the mere potentiality to be 'as you like.'" Hitler's "revolution of nihilism" was based precisely on this sense of the irrelevancy of known past to lived present. "What was true in the nineteenth century," Hitler said on one occasion to Rauschnig, "is no longer true in the twentieth." And both Nazi intellectuals (such as Heidegger and Jünger) and Existentialist enemies of Nazism in France (such as Camus and Sartre) agreed with him on this matter. For both, the issue was not *how* the past was to be studied, but *if* it ought to be studied at all.

Meursault, the hero of Camus's first novel, *The Stranger* (1942), is an "innocent" murderer. His killing of a man he does not know is a totally meaningless gesture, no different in essence from the thousands of other thoughtless acts which make up his daily life. It is the "historically" wise prosecutor who shows the jury how the atomic events that constitute Meursault's existence can be linked together in such a way as to make him "responsible" for a "crime" and to justify his condemnation as a murderer. Meursault's life, represented by the author as a perfectly random set of events, is woven into a pattern of conscious intention by those who "know" what both private sensibility and public gesture ought to "mean." It is this ability to cast a web of specious "meaning" over the past which alone, according to Camus, allows society to distinguish between Meursault's "crime" and society's "execution" of him as a murderer. Camus denied that there is any real distinction between different kinds of killing. It is only hypocrisy, sustained by historical consciousness, that allows society to call Meursault's act a "murder" and its own execution of Meursault "justice."

In *The Rebel* (1951) Camus returned to this theme, arguing that both the totalitarianism and the anarchism of the present age had their origins in a

nihilistic attitude that derived from Western man's obsessive desire to make sense of history. "Purely historical thought is nihilistic," he wrote; "it wholeheartedly accepts the evil of history," and delivers the earth to naked force. And then, echoing the Nietzsche he had just decried, he sets art over against history as that which alone can reunite man with a nature from which he has become all but totally estranged. The poet René Char provides Camus with an epitaph for his basic posture on the matter: "Obsession with the harvest and indifference to history are the two extremities of my bow."

Whatever their differences on other subjects, the two leaders of French Existentialism, Camus and Sartre, agreed in their contempt for historical consciousness. The protagonist of Sartre's first novel, Roquentin, in *Nausea* (1938), is a professional historian who, as he himself puts it, has "written lots of articles," but nothing that required any "talent." Roquentin is trying to write a book on an eighteenth-century diplomat, one Marquis de Rolleston. But he is overwhelmed by the documents; there are just "too many" of them. Moreover, they lack all "firmness and consistency." It is not that they contradict each other, Roquentin says, it is that "they do not seem to be about the same persons." And yet, Roquentin notes in his diary: "Other historians work from the same sources of information. How do they do it?"

The answer, of course, lies in Roquentin's own sense of the absence of all "firmness and consistency" in himself. Roquentin experiences his own body as "nature without humanity" and his mental life as an illusion: "Nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that's all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition." Roquentin lacks any central consciousness on the basis of which the world, either of past or present, can be ordered. "I hadn't the right to exist," Roquentin writes; "I had appeared by chance, I existed like a stone, a plant, a microbe. My life put out feelers towards small pleasures in every direction. Sometimes it put out vague signals; at other times I felt nothing more than a harmless buzzing." His friend, the Autodidact, who possesses a simple faith in the power of learning to bring salvation, holds up before Roquentin the model of The American Optimist. The Optimist believes, like the old-fashioned humanist, that "Life has a meaning if we choose to give it one." But Roquentin's sickness arises precisely from his incapacity to believe in such fatuous slogans. To him, "Everything is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance." Sartre had only to add the "*Ecce historia!*" of Gottfried Benn to telegraph more explicitly the anti-historicist bent of his first philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), on which he was working while he was writing *Nausea*. Reviewers of Sartre's *The Words* (1964) would have done well to have kept *Nausea* and *Being and Nothingness* in mind. Had they done so they would have been less offended by the opaqueness of Sartre's "con-

fessions." They would have known that he believes that the only important history is what the individual remembers and that the individual remembers only what he *wills* to remember. Sartre rejects the psychoanalytical doctrine of the unconscious and argues that the past is what we decide to remember of it; it enjoys no existence apart from our consciousness of it. We choose our past in the same way that we choose our future. The historical past, therefore, is, like our various personal pasts, at best a myth, justifying our gamble on a specific future, and at worst a lie, a retrospective rationalization of what we have in fact become through our choices.

I could continue to add to these examples of the revolt against history in modern writing. But if I have not made my point by now, I shall probably not succeed in making it at all: the modern artist does not think very much of what used to be called the "historical imagination." In fact, to many of them the phrase "historical imagination" not only contains a contradiction in terms; it constitutes the fundamental barrier to any attempt by men in the present to close realistically with their most pressing spiritual problems. The attitude of many modern artists towards history is much like that of N. O. Brown, who sees history as a kind of "fixation" which "alienates the neurotic from the present and commits him to the unconscious quest for the past in the future." For them, as for Brown, history is not only a substantive burden imposed upon the present by the past in the form of outmoded institutions, ideas, and values, but also *the way of looking at the world* which gives to these outmoded forms their specious authority. In short, to a significant segment of the artistic community the historian appears as the carrier of a disease which was at once the motive force and the nemesis of nineteenth-century civilization. This is why so much of modern fiction turns upon the attempt to liberate Western man from the tyranny of the historical consciousness. It tells us that it is only by disenthraling human intelligence from the sense of history that men will be able to confront creatively the problems of the present. The implications of all this for any historian who values the artistic vision as anything more than mere play are obvious: he must ask himself how he can participate in this liberating activity and whether his participation entails the destruction of history itself.

Historians cannot ignore criticism from the intellectual community at large, nor take refuge in the favor which they enjoy with the literate laity. For an appeal to the esteem in which a learned discipline is held by the common man might be used to justify any kind of activity, harmful as well as beneficial to civilization. Such an appeal can be used to justify the most banal journalism. In fact, taking the case of journalism a bit further, the more banal the journalism, the better its chances of being esteemed by the common man. And far from providing a source of comfort, there might be genuine cause for concern

when any learned discipline loses its occult character and begins to deal in truths which *only* the general public finds exciting. In so far as historians pretend to belong to a community of intellectuals distinguishable from the literate public in general, they have obligations to the former that transcend their obligations to the latter. If therefore both artists and scientists — in their capacities as artists and scientists and not in their capacities as members of the Civil War Book Club — find the truths which historians deal in trivial and possibly harmful, then it is time for historians to ask themselves seriously whether such charges may not have some basis in reality.

Nor can historians plead that the judgments of artists and scientists about how the past ought to be studied are irrelevant. After all, historians have conventionally maintained that neither a specific methodology nor a special intellectual equipment is required for the study of history. What is usually called the “training” of the historian consists for the most part of study in a few languages, journeyman work in the archives, and the performance of a few set exercises to acquaint him with standard reference works and journals in his field. For the rest, a general experience of human affairs, reading in peripheral fields, self-discipline, and *Sitzfleisch* are all that are necessary. Anyone can master the requirements fairly easily. How can it be said then that the professional historian is peculiarly qualified to define the questions which one may ask of the historical record and is alone able to determine when adequate answers to the questions thus posed have been given? It is no longer self-evidently true for the intellectual community at large that the disinterested study of the past — “for its own sake,” as the cliché has it — is either ennobling or even illuminative of our humanity. In fact, the general consensus in both the arts and the sciences seems to be precisely the opposite. And it follows that *the burden of the historian* in our time is to re-establish the dignity of historical studies on a basis that will make them consonant with the aims and purposes of the intellectual community at large, that is, transform historical studies in such a way as to allow the historian to participate positively in the liberation of the present from *the burden of history*.

#### IV

How can this be done? First of all, historians must admit the justification of the current rebellion against the past. Contemporary Western man has good reason to be obsessed by his sense of the uniqueness of his problems and is justifiably convinced that the historical record as presently provided offers little help in the quest for adequate solutions to those problems. To anyone who is sensitive to the radical dissimilarity of our present to all past situations, the study of the past “as an end in itself” can only appear as thoughtless

obstructionism, as willful resistance to the attempt to close with the present world in all its strangeness and mystery. In the world in which we daily live, anyone who studies the past "as an end in itself" must appear as either an antiquarian, fleeing from the problems of the present into a purely personal past, or a kind of cultural necrophile, that is, one who finds in the dead and dying a value he can never find in the living. The contemporary historian has to establish the value of the study of the past, not as "an end in itself," but as a way of providing perspectives on the present that contribute to the solution of problems peculiar to our own time.

Since the historian claims no way of knowing uniquely his own, this implies a willingness on the part of the contemporary historian to come to terms with the techniques of analysis and representation which *modern* science and *modern* art have offered for understanding the operations of consciousness and social process. In short, the historian can claim a voice in the contemporary cultural dialogue only in so far as he takes seriously the kind of questions that the art and the science of *his own time* demand that he ask of the materials he has chosen to study.

Historians frequently look back upon the early nineteenth century as the classic age of their discipline, not only because history emerged as a distinct way of looking at the world at that time, but also because there was a close working relationship and interchange between history, art, science, and philosophy. Romantic artists went to history for their themes and appealed to "historical consciousness" as a justification for their attempts at cultural palinogenesis, their attempts to make the past a living presence to their contemporaries. And certain sciences, geology and biology in particular, availed themselves of ideas and concepts which had been commonly used only in history up to that time. The category of the historical dominated philosophy among the post-Kantian idealists and served as the organizing category among the later Hegelians, of both the Left and the Right. To the modern historian reflecting on the achievements of that age in all fields of thought and expression, the critical importance of the sense of history appears obvious, the function of the historian as mediator between the arts and sciences of the age seems manifest.

It would be more correct, however, to recognize that the early nineteenth century was a time when art, science, philosophy, and history were united in a *common effort* to comprehend the experiences of the French Revolution. What is most impressive about the achievements of that age is not "the sense of history" as such, but the willingness of intellectuals in all fields to cross the boundaries that divided one discipline from another and to open themselves up to the use of illuminating metaphors for organizing reality, whatever their origins in particular disciplines or world-views. Men like Michelet and Tocqueville are properly designated as historians only by their subject matter, not

by their methods. In so far as their method alone is concerned, they are just as easily designated as scientists, artists, or philosophers. The same can be said of “historians” like Ranke and Niebuhr, of “novelists” like Stendhal and Balzac, of “philosophers” like Hegel and Marx, and of “poets” like Heine and Lamartine.

But some time during the nineteenth century all this changed: not because artists, scientists, and philosophers ceased to be interested in historical questions, but because many historians had become wedded to certain early nineteenth-century conceptions of what art, science, and philosophy *ought to be*. And in so far as historians of the second half of the nineteenth century continued to see their work as a combination of art and science, they saw it as a combination of *romantic* art on the one hand and of *positivistic* science on the other. In sum, by the middle of the nineteenth century, historians, for whatever reason, had become locked into conceptions of art and science which both artists and scientists had progressively to abandon if they were to understand the changing world of internal and external perceptions offered to them by the historical process itself. One of the reasons, then, that the modern artist, unlike his early nineteenth-century counterpart, refuses to admit a common cause with the modern historian is that he rightly sees the historian as the custodian of an antiquated notion of what art is.

In fact, when many contemporary historians speak of the “art” of history, they seem to have in mind a conception of art that would admit little more than the nineteenth-century novel as a paradigm. And when they say that they are artists, they seem to mean that they are artists in the way that Scott or Thackeray were artists. They certainly do not mean to identify themselves with action painters, kinetic sculptors, existentialist novelists, imagist poets, or *nouvelle vague* cinematographers. While often displaying the works of modern non-objective artists on their walls and in their bookcases, historians continue to act as if they believed that the major, not to say the sole, purpose of art is to tell a story. Thus, for example, H. Stuart Hughes argues in a recent work on the relation of history to science and art that “the historian’s supreme technical virtuosity lies in fusing the new method of social and psychological analysis with his traditional storytelling function.” It is of course true that the artist’s purpose *may* be served by telling a story, but this is only one of the possible modes of representation offered to him today, and it is a decreasingly important one at that, as the *nouvelle roman* in France has impressively shown.

A similar criticism can be levelled at the historian’s claim to a place among the scientists. When historians speak of themselves as scientists, they seem to be invoking a conception of science that was perfectly suitable for the world in which Herbert Spencer lived and worked, but it has very little to do with the physical sciences as they have developed *since* Einstein and with

the social sciences as they have evolved *since* Weber. Again, when Hughes speaks of “the new method of social and psychological analysis,” he seems to have in mind the methods offered by Weber and Freud — methods which some contemporary social scientists regard as being at best the primitive roots, rather than the mature fruit, of their disciplines.

In sum, when historians claim that history is a combination of science and art, they generally mean that it is a combination of *late nineteenth-century* social science and *mid-nineteenth century* art. That is to say, they seem to be aspiring to little more than a synthesis of modes of analysis and expression that have their antiquity alone to commend them. If this is the case, then artists and scientists alike are justified in criticizing historians, *not because they study the past*, but because they are studying it with *bad* science and *bad* art.

The “badness” of these hoary conceptions of science and art is contained above all in the outmoded conceptions of objectivity which characterize them. Many historians continue to treat their “facts” as though they were “given” and refuse to recognize, unlike most scientists, that they are not so much “found” as “constructed” by the kinds of questions which the investigator asks of the phenomena before him. It is the same notion of objectivity that binds historians to an uncritical use of the chronological framework for their narratives. When historians try to relate their “findings” about the “facts” in what they call an “artistic” manner, they uniformly eschew the techniques of literary representation which Joyce, Yeats, and Ibsen have contributed to modern culture. There have been no significant attempts at surrealist, expressionistic, or existentialist historiography in this century (except by novelists and poets themselves) for all of the vaunted “artistry” of the historians of modern times. It is almost as if the historians believed that the *sole possible form* of historical narration was that used in the English novel as it had developed by the late nineteenth century. And the result of this has been the progressive antiquation of the “art” of historiography itself.

Burckhardt, for all his Schopenhauerian pessimism (or perhaps because of it), was willing to experiment with the most advanced artistic techniques of *his* time. His *Civilization of the Renaissance* can be regarded as an exercise in impressionistic historiography, constituting, in its own way, as radical a departure from the conventional historiography of the nineteenth century as that of the impressionist painters, or that of Baudelaire in poetry. Beginning students in history — and not a few professionals — have trouble with Burckhardt because he broke with the dogma that an historical account has to “tell a story,” at least in the usual, chronologically ordered way. To account for the strangeness of Burckhardt’s work, modern historians of historical writing have put him down as a kind of embryonic social scientist, who dealt in

ideal types and therefore anticipated Weber. The generalization would be true only if it were set within the context of an awareness of the extent to which Burckhardt and Weber both shared a peculiarly aesthetic conception of science. Like his contemporaries in art, Burckhardt cuts into the historical record at different points and suggests different perspectives on it, omitting, ignoring, or distorting as his artistic purpose requires. His intention was not to tell the *whole* truth about the Italian Renaissance but *one* truth about it, in precisely the same way that Cézanne abandoned any attempt to tell the whole truth about a landscape. He had abandoned the dream of telling the truth about the past by means of telling a story because he had long since abandoned the belief that history had any inherent meaning or significance. The only “truth” that Burckhardt recognized was that which he had learned from Schopenhauer — namely, that every attempt to give form to the world, every human affirmation, was tragically doomed in the end, but that individual affirmation attained to a worth of its own in so far as it succeeded in imposing upon the chaos of the world a momentary form.

Thus in Burckhardt’s work the concept of “individualism” serves primarily as a focussing metaphor which, precisely because it filters out certain kinds of information and heightens awareness of others, allows him to see what he wants to see with especial clarity. The usual chronological framework would have hindered this attempt at achieving a *specific* perspective on his problem, and so Burckhardt abandoned it. And once he was freed from the limitations of the “storytelling” technique, he was liberated from the necessity of constructing a “plot” with heroes, villains, and chorus, as the conventional historian is always driven to do. Since he possessed the courage to use a metaphor constructed out of his own immediate experience, Burckhardt was able to see things in the life of the fifteenth century that no one had seen with a similar clarity before him. Even those conventional historians who find him wrong in his facts grant to his work the title of a classic. What most fail to see, however, is that in praising Burckhardt they often condemn their own rigid commitment to conceptions of science and art which Burckhardt himself had transcended.

Many historians today show interest in the latest technical and methodological developments in the social sciences. Some are attempting to utilize econometrics, game theory, theory of conflict resolution, role analysis and the rest of it whenever they sense that their conventional historiographical purposes can be served in so doing. But very few historians have tried to utilize modern artistic techniques in any significant way. One of the few to have made the effort is Norman O. Brown.

In *Life Against Death*, Brown offers the historiographical equivalent of the anti-novel; for he is writing anti-history. Those historians who have even

bothered to notice Brown's book have usually labelled him a Freudian and dismissed him. But Brown's true significance lies in his willingness to follow out a line of investigation suggested by Nietzsche and carried forward by Klages, Heidegger, and contemporary existentially-oriented phenomenologists. He begins by assuming nothing about the validity of history, either as a mode of existence or as a form of knowing. He uses historical materials, but he uses them in precisely the same way that one might use contemporary experience. He reduces all of the data of consciousness, past as well as present, to the same ontological level, and then, by a series of brilliant and shocking juxtapositions, involutions, reductions, and distortions, forces the reader to see with new clarity materials to which he has become oblivious through sustained association, or which he has repressed in response to social imperatives. In short, in his history Brown achieves the same effects as those sought by a "Pop" artist or by John Cage in one of his "happenings."

Is there anything intrinsic to our approach to the past that allows us to regard Brown as unworthy of consideration as a serious historian? Certainly, we cannot do so if we maintain the myth that historians are as much artists as scientists. For in Brown's book we are forced to confront the problem of the style he has chosen for his work as an historian before we can go on to the further question of whether his history constitutes an "adequate" portrayal of the past or not.

But where are we to find the criterion to determine when, on the one hand, the "account" is adequate to the "facts" and if, on the other, the "style" chosen by the historian is appropriate or inappropriate to the "account"? Those historians who credit the belief that history is a combination of art and science ought to address themselves to the further "internal" problem of the equation, that is to say, the problem of the choice of *one* artistic style among the many offered for consideration by the literary heritage in which the historian works. For it is no longer obvious that we can use the terms "artist" and "storyteller" synonymously. If we are going to call into question the right of an historian to use a nineteenth-century notion of social science, we must also be prepared to call into question his use of a nineteenth-century conception of art.

## V

There is a sense in which the notion that history is a combination of science and art is merely a further indication of the antiquated views of both which obtain among historians. For nearly three decades now, philosophers of science and aestheticians have been working toward a better understanding of the similarities between scientific statements on the one hand and artistic statements on the other. Inquiries such as those of Karl Popper into the logic of scientific explanation and the impact of probability theory on considerations

of the nature of scientific laws have undermined the naive positivist's notion of the absolute character of scientific propositions. Contemporary British and American philosophers have modulated the harsh distinctions originally drawn by positivists between scientific statements on the one hand and metaphysical statements on the other, removing the stigma of "meaninglessness" from the latter. Within the atmosphere of exchange between the "two cultures" thus generated, a better understanding of the nature of artistic statements has been achieved — and with it a better possibility of resolving the old problem of the relation of the scientific to the artistic components in historical explanations.

It now seems possible to hold that an explanation need not be assigned unilaterally to the category of the literally truthful on the one hand or the purely imaginary on the other, but can be judged solely in terms of the richness of the metaphors which govern its sequence of articulation. Thus envisaged, the governing metaphor of an historical account could be treated as a *heuristic rule which self-consciously eliminates certain kinds of data from consideration as evidence*. The historian operating under such a conception could thus be viewed as one who, like the modern artist and scientist, seeks to exploit a certain perspective on the world that does not pretend to exhaust description or analysis of all of the data in the entire phenomenal field but rather offers itself as *one way among many* of disclosing certain aspects of the field. As Gombrich points out in *Art and Illusion*, we do not expect that Constable and Cézanne will have looked for the same thing in a given landscape, and when we confront their respective representations of a landscape, we do not expect to have to choose between them and determine which is the "more correct" one. The result of this attitude is not relativism but the recognition that the style chosen by the artist to represent either an inner or an outer experience carries with it, on the one hand, specific criteria for determining when a given representation is internally consistent and, on the other, provides a system of translation which allows the viewer to link the image with the thing represented on specific levels of objectification. Style thus functions as what Gombrich calls a "system of notation," as a provisional protocol or an etiquette. When we view the work of an artist — or for that matter of a scientist — we do not ask if he sees what we would see in the same general phenomenal field, but whether or not he has introduced into his representation of it anything that could be considered false information *for anyone who is capable of understanding the system of notation used*.

If applied to historical writing, the methodological and stylistic cosmopolitanism which this conception of representation promotes would force historians to abandon the attempt to portray "one particular portion of life, *right side up* and in *true* perspective," as a famous historian put it some years ago, and to recognize that there is no such thing as a *single* correct view of any object

under study but there are *many* correct views, each requiring its own style of representation. This would allow us to entertain seriously those creative distortions offered by minds capable of looking at the past with the same seriousness as ourselves but with different affective and intellectual orientations. Then we should no longer naively expect that statements about a given epoch or complex of events in the past "correspond" to some pre-existent body of "raw facts." For we should recognize that *what constitutes the facts themselves* is the problem that the historian, like the artist, has tried to solve in the choice of the metaphor by which he orders his world, past, present, and future. We should ask only that the historian show some tact in the use of his governing metaphors: that he neither overburden them with data nor fail to use them to their limit; that he respect the logic implicit in the mode of discourse he has decided upon; and that, when his metaphor begins to show itself unable to accommodate certain kinds of data, he abandon that metaphor and seek another, richer, and more inclusive metaphor than that with which he began — in the same way that a scientist abandons a hypothesis when its use is exhausted.

Such a conception of historical inquiry and representation would open up the possibility of using contemporary scientific *and* artistic insights in history without leading to radical relativism and the assimilation of history to propaganda, or to that fatal monism which has always heretofore resulted from attempts to wed history and science. It would permit the plunder of psychoanalysis, cybernetics, game theory, and the rest without forcing the historian to treat the metaphors thus confiscated from them as inherent in the data under analysis, as he is forced to do when he works under the demand for an impossibly comprehensive objectivity. And it would permit historians to conceive of the possibility of using impressionistic, expressionistic, surrealistic, and (perhaps) even actionist modes of representation for dramatizing the significance of data which they have uncovered but which, all too frequently, they are prohibited from seriously contemplating as evidence. If historians of our generation were willing to participate actively in the general intellectual and artistic life of our time, the worth of history would not have to be defended in the timid and ambivalent ways that it is now done. The methodological ambiguity of history offers opportunities for creative comment on past and present that no other discipline enjoys. If historians were to seize the opportunities thus offered, they might in time convince their colleagues in other fields of intellectual and expressive endeavor of the falsity of Nietzsche's claim that history is "a costly and superfluous luxury of the understanding."

But to what purpose ultimately? Merely to exploit the human capacity for play or mind's ability to frolic in images? There are worse activities for a

morally responsible man, of course, but merely to demand the exercise of our image-making abilities does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that we should exercise them on the historical past. Here it would be well to bear in mind the line of argument which descends from Schopenhauer to Sartre and which suggests that the historical record can never become the occasion of either significant aesthetic or scientific experience. The documentary record, this tradition maintains, first invites the exercise of the speculative imagination by its incompleteness, and then discourages it by requiring that the historian remain bound to the consideration of those few facts which it does provide. To both Schopenhauer and Sartre, therefore, the artist is well advised to ignore the historical record and limit himself to the consideration of the phenomenal world as presented to him in his everyday experience. It is worth asking, then, why the past ought to be studied at all and what function can be served by a contemplation of things under the aspect of history. Put another way: is there any reason why we ought to study things under the aspect of their past-ness rather than under the aspect of their present-ness, which is the aspect under which everything offers itself for contemplation immediately?

In my view, the most suggestive answer to this question was provided by thinkers who flourished during history's golden age — the period between 1800 and 1850. Thinkers of that age recognized that the function of history, as distinguished from both the art and the science *of that time*, was to provide a specific temporal dimension to man's awareness of himself. Whereas both before and after this time students of human affairs tended to reduce human phenomena to manifestations of hypostatized natural or mental processes (as in idealism, naturalism, vitalism, and the like), the best representatives of historical thought between 1800 and 1850 saw the historical imagination as a faculty which, beginning in man's impulse to clothe the chaos of the phenomenal world in stable images, that is, in an aesthetic impulse, discharged itself in a tragic reaffirmation of the fundamental fact of change and process, providing thereby a ground for the celebration of man's responsibility for his own fate.

The exponents of realistic historicism — Hegel, Balzac, and Tocqueville, to take representatives from philosophy, the novel, and historiography respectively — agreed that the task of the historian was less to remind men of their obligation to the past than to force upon them an awareness of how the past could be used to effect an ethically responsible transition from present to future. All three saw history as educating men to the fact that their own present world had once existed in the minds of men as an unknown and frightening future, but how, as a consequence of specific human decisions, this future had been transformed into a present, that familiar world in which the historian himself lived and worked. All three saw history as informed by a tragic sense

of the absurdity of individual human aspiration and, at the same time, a sense of the necessity of such aspiration if the human residuum were to be saved from the potentially destructive awareness of the movement of time. Thus, for all three, history was less an end in itself than a preparation for a more perfect understanding and acceptance of the individual's responsibility in the fashioning of the common humanity of the future. Hegel, for example, writes that in historical reflection Spirit is "engulfed in the night of its own self-consciousness; its vanished existence is, however, conserved therein; and this superseded existence — the previous state, but born anew from the womb of knowledge — is the new stage of existence, a new world, and a new embodiment or mode of Spirit." Balzac presents his *Human Comedy* as a "history of the human heart" which advances the novel beyond the point where Scott had left it by virtue of the "system" that links the various pieces of the whole together in a "complete history of which each chapter is a novel and each novel the picture of a period," the whole promoting a more realistic awareness of the uniqueness of the present age. And, finally, Tocqueville offers his *Ancien Régime* as an effort to "make clear in what respects [the present social system] resembles and in what it differs from the social system that preceded it; and to determine what was gained by that upheaval." And he goes on to point out: "When I have found in our forefathers any of those virtues so vital to a nation but now well-nigh extinct — a spirit of healthy independence, high ambitions, faith in oneself and in a cause — I have thrown them into relief. Similarly, whenever I found traces of any of those vices which after destroying the old order still affect the body politic, I have emphasized them; for it is in the light of evils to which they formerly gave rise that we can gauge the harm they yet may do." In short, all three interpreted the burden of the historian as a moral charge to free men from the burden of history. They did not see the historian as prescribing a specific ethical system valid for all times and places, but they did see him as charged with the special task of inducing in men an awareness that their present condition was always in part a product of specifically human choices, which could therefore be changed or altered by further human action in precisely that degree. History thus sensitized men to the *dynamic* elements in every achieved present, taught the inevitability of change, and thereby contributed to the release of that present to the past without ire or resentment. It was only after historians lost sight of these dynamic elements in their own lived present, and began to relegate all significant change to a mythic past — thereby implicitly contributing only to the justification of the *status quo* — that critics such as Nietzsche could rightly accuse them of being servants of the present triviality, whatever it might be.

History today has an opportunity to avail itself of the new perspectives on the world which a dynamic science and an equally dynamic art offer.

Both science and art have transcended the older, stable conceptions of the world which required that they render a literal copy of a presumably static reality. And both have discovered the essentially *provisional* character of the metaphorical constructions which they use to comprehend a dynamic universe. Thus they affirm implicitly the truth arrived at by Camus when he wrote: "It was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be lived. It now becomes clear, on the contrary, that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning." We might amend the statement to read: it will be lived all the better if it has no single meaning but many different ones.

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, history has become increasingly the refuge of all of those "sane" men who excel at finding the simple in the complex and the familiar in the strange. This was all very well for an earlier age, but if the present generation needs anything at all it is a willingness to confront heroically the dynamic and disruptive forces in contemporary life. The historian serves no one well by constructing a specious continuity between the present world and that which preceded it. On the contrary, we require a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot. If, as Nietzsche said, "we have art in order not to die of the truth," we also have truth in order to escape the seduction of a world which is nothing but the creation of our longings. History can provide a ground upon which we can seek that "impossible transparency" demanded by Camus for the distracted humanity of our time. Only a chaste historical consciousness can truly challenge the world anew every second, for only history mediates between what is and what men think ought to be with truly humanizing effect. But history can serve to humanize experience only if it remains sensitive to the more general world of thought *and* action from which it proceeds and to which it returns. And as long as it refuses to use the eyes which *both* modern art and modern science can give it, it must remain blind — citizen of a world in which "the pallid shades of memory struggle in vain with the life and freedom of the present."

*The University of Rochester*