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HISTORIA MAGISTRA VITAE

THE DISSOLUTION OF THE TOPOS INTO THE PERSPECTIVE OF A MODERNIZED HISTORICAL PROCESS

*There is a history in all men's lives,
Figuring the natures of the times deceased;
The which observed, a man may prophesy,
With a near aim, of the main chance of things
As yet not come to life, which in their seeds
And weak beginnings lie intresured.*

—Shakespeare (Henry IV, Part Two Act III Scene 1)

Friedrich von Raumer, known as the historiographer to the Hohenstaufen, reports the following episode from the year 1811, when he was still Hardenberg's secretary:

During counsel in Charlottenburg, Oelssen [section head in the Ministry of Finance] animatedly defended the preparation of a quantity of paper money so that debts could be paid. All argument to the contrary failing, I said with immense audacity (knowing my man): "But Privy Councillor, do you not remember that Thucydides tells of the evils that followed from the circulation of too much paper money in Athens?" This experience," he concurred, "is certainly of great importance"—and in this way he allowed himself to be persuaded in order that he might retain the appearance of learning.¹

In the heated debates over the redemption of the Prussian debt Raumer made use of a lie; he knew that Antiquity had known no paper money. But he risked a lie since he calculated its effect—appealing rhetorically to the schooling of his opponent. That effect relied on the force of that old topos, according to which history is supposed to be the great teacher of life. The privy councilor acquiesced to this formula, not to an argument. *Historia magistra vitae*.

“For that which we cannot ourselves experience, we have to follow the experience of others”—thus Zedler’s *Universal-Lexicon* in 1735,² where history is presented as a kind of reservoir of multiplied experiences which the readers can learn and make their own; in the words of one of the ancients, history makes us free to repeat the successes of the past instead of recommitting earlier mistakes in the present day.³ This was the function of history for about two thousand years, a school in which one could become prudent without error.

What does the application of this topos to our Charlottenburg example tell us? Thanks to his skill in argument, Raumer placed his colleagues in a seemingly continuous space of experience, but one that he himself treated with irony. The scene demonstrates the continuing role of history as the teacher of life, while also demonstrating how questionable this role had become.

Before pursuing the question of the degree to which this older topos had dissolved into a modernized historical process, we need to look back on its persistence. It lasted almost unbroken into the eighteenth century. Until the present we have had no account of all the expressions through which historicity has been conceptualized. Hence we lack a history of the formula *historia magistra vitae*, regardless of how much its meaning led historians’ own understanding through the centuries, if not their work. Despite a verbal identity, the coordinates of our formula have varied greatly over time. It was not unusual for historiographers to reduce the topos to an empty rubric, only used in prefaces. It is therefore more difficult to identify the difference that always prevailed between the mere use of a commonplace and its practical effectiveness. Besides this problem, however, the longevity of our topos is certainly instructive, indicating its flexibility in accommodating the most diverse conclusions. We can also note the manner in which two contemporaries employed this exemplary function of history: Montaigne’s purpose was more or less opposite to Bodin’s. For Montaigne, histories showed how every generalization was nullified, whereas Bodin used them to disclose general rules.⁴ For both men, however, histories provided exempla of life. Thus the idiom is a formal one, as later expressed in the familiar saying, “One can prove anything with history.”⁵

Whatever doctrine our formula serves, each instance of its use is indicative of something. It implies a thorough apprehension of human possibilities within a general historical continuum. History can instruct its contemporaries or their descendants on how to become more prudent or relatively better, but only as long as the given assumptions and conditions are funda-

mentally the same. Until the eighteenth century, the use of our expression remained an unmistakable index for an assumed constancy of human nature, accounts of which can serve as iterable means for the proof of moral, theological, legal, or political doctrines. Likewise, the utility of our topos depended on a real constancy of those circumstances implying the potential similitude of earthly events. If there were a degree of social change, it occurred so slowly and over such a period that the utility of past examples was retained. The temporal structure of past history bounded a continuous space of potential experience.

I

The idiom *historia magistra vitae* was coined by Cicero, borrowing from a Hellenistic pattern.⁶ It found its place within the rhetorical principle that only the orator was capable of lending immortality to a history instructive of life, of rendering perennial its store of experience. The usage is, moreover, associated with further metaphors indicating the tasks of history. “*Historia vero testis temporum, lux veritatis, vita memoriae, magistra vitae, nuntia vetustatis, qua voce alia nisi oratoris immortalitati commendatur?*”⁷ The primary task assigned here by Cicero to a knowledge of history is principally directed toward the praxis in which the orator involves himself. He makes use of *historia* as a collection of examples—“*Plena exemplorum est historia*”⁸—that can be employed instructively, and in a more straightforward manner than had Thucydides, who emphasized the usefulness of his work by delivering up his history as *κτημα ες αιει*, a permanent possession for knowledge of similarly constituted cases in the future.

Cicero’s authority persisted into the Christian experience of history. Monastery libraries not infrequently catalogued his philosophical works as collections of examples, and were widely available.⁹ Therefore the possibility of literal resort to the idiom always existed, even if it at first provoked some opposition against the heathen *historia magistra* on the part of Church fathers upholding the authority of the Bible. Isidor of Seville had made frequent use of Cicero’s *De oratore* in his widely available etymological compendium, but he suppressed the expression *historia magistra vitae* in his definitions of history. The apologists of Christianity had no little trouble passing on as precedents events belonging to a profane history, and a heathen one at that.¹⁰ The employment of such a history as the teacher of life, replete with bad examples, was beyond even the transformatory powers of

Church historiography. Nonetheless, even Isidor allowed heathen histories an educational function, if somewhat covertly.¹¹ Likewise, Bede consciously justified profane history on the grounds that it provided examples that were either intimidating, or worth imitating.¹² The great influence of both clerics thus ensured that, alongside a history mainly founded upon religion, the motif of a profane instructional history retained its constant, if subordinate, role.

Melanchthon too made use of this pairing, according to which both biblical and heathen histories were capable of delivering exempla for earthly change, variously indicating God's works and arrangements.¹³ The conception of the task of historical writing derived from antiquity could thus be brought into line with a Christian experience of history associated with expectations of salvation. Nor did the linear schema of biblical prefiguration and its fulfillment—right up to Bossuet—rupture the framework within which one derived lessons for the future out of the past.

As millennial expectations became more volatile, ancient history, in its role of teacher, once more forced itself to the fore. Machiavelli's call, not only to admire the ancients but also to imitate them,¹⁴ gave an edge to the resolution that one should continually draw benefit from history because of the unique manner in which it united exemplary and empirical thought. At the head of his *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem*, Bodin placed the Ciceronian topos: this prominence was owed to the way in which it indicated the holy laws of history, thanks to which men could recognize their present and illuminate the future—and this was not intended as a theological, but as a practical political statement.¹⁵ It would be too wearisome to list the ceaseless repetition¹⁶ or baroque elaboration¹⁷ of an idea that recurred right up to the later Enlightenment, and writers such as de Mably.¹⁸ We can find our topos varied in chronicles and histories from pathetic formulas such as *futurorum magistra temporum*¹⁹ to casual, imitative maxims.

Thus, for instance, Lengnich, a Danzig historiographer, wrote that a knowledge of history opened up to us "all that could be used again under the same conditions."²⁰ Or, to cite a far less obscure man: Lieutenant General Freiherr von Hardenberg instructed his son's tutor not to confuse his charge with dry facts. For

. . . in general all past and present actions appear to be similar; systematic knowledge of them is broadly superfluous, but nonetheless of great utility if this skeleton is covered with the appropriate flesh, and a young man shown the forces behind great changes, or the nature of the coun-

sel or other means behind the achievement of this or that objective, or in what way or why it failed. In this way one preaches more to understanding than to memory; history becomes pleasant and interesting for the pupil, and he is imperceptibly instructed in the prudence of both private and state affairs, and educated in the way of *artes belli ac pacis*.²¹

The importance of this last testimony of a concerned father relating to the proper education of a son underlines the manner in which pedagogic expectations of an enlightened age once again coincide with the accustomed task of history.

Without prejudice to these evidently historiographic statements, one should not underestimate the practical, didactic force of early modern historico-political literature.²² Legal process depended directly on historical deductions; the relative eternity within which the law operated at that time corresponded to a history conscious of its implication within a changeless, but iterable, nature. The increasing refinement of contemporary politics was mirrored in the reflections of memoirists and the doings reported by envoys. But in this way it remained bound to the indices of *Kameralistik* and *Statistik*: the chronicling of space. It is more than a habitual topos that Frederick the Great constantly invokes in his memoirs: that history is the school of the ruler, from Thucydides to Commines, Cardinal Retz, or Colbert. By continually comparing earlier cases, he claimed to have sharpened his powers of deduction. He finally invoked—as a means of explaining, without any apology, his “immoral politics”—the countless examples thanks to which the rules of *Staatsräson* had guided him in his political actions.²³

Irony is certainly mixed with resignation when Frederick claims in his old age that the scenes of world history repeat themselves and that it is necessary only to change the names.²⁴ In this dictum there might even be seen a secularization of figurative thought, for it is certain that the thesis of iterability and thence the pedagogy of historical experience remained an element of experience itself. Frederick’s prognosis of the French Revolution testifies to this.²⁵ Within the closed space of the European republic of rulers, with its domestic state bodies and its various *ständisch* orders, the pedagogic role of history simultaneously guaranteed, and was at the same time symptomatic of, a continuity connecting the past to the future.

Naturally, there were objections to the maxim according to which one could learn from history. For instance, Guicciardini—with Aristotle—always regarded the future as uncertain, and consequently denied the prog-

nostic content of history.²⁶ Or take Gracian, who, on the basis of the doctrine of circulation, affirmed the principle of foreknowledge, but emptied it of meaning, rendering it ultimately superfluous by the inevitability inherent in it.²⁷ Or take old Frederick himself, who closed his memoir of the Seven Years War by disputing the pedagogy of all examples: “For it is a property of the human spirit that examples teach no one. The stupidities of the fathers are lost upon their children; each generation must commit its own.”²⁸

Of course, the skeptical attitude sustaining such views did not shatter the distinctive integrity inherent to our didactic formula, since it was rooted in the same experiential space. For the contention that one could learn nothing from history was itself a certainty born of experience, a historical lesson that could render the knowing more insightful, more prudent, or, to borrow a term from Burckhardt,²⁹ wiser. The constant possibility of otherness proved so powerless in abolishing similitude from the world that this otherness cannot as a consequence be conceived as an otherness. “What vanishes is the determinate element, or the moment of difference which, whatever its mode of being and whatever its source, sets itself up as something fixed and immutable.”³⁰ The skeptical undercurrent which was still able, in the Enlightenment, to articulate itself in terms of eternal similitude, was incapable of fundamentally questioning the meaning of the topos. Nevertheless, at the same time the meaningful content of our idiom was hollowed out. The ancient form of History was pushed from its lectern, not least by enlightened men who made such free use of its teachings; and all in the course of a movement bringing past and future into a new relationship. It was ultimately “history itself” that began to open up a new experiential space. This new history assumed a temporal quality peculiar to itself, whose diverse times and shifting periods of experience drew its evidence from an exemplary past.

This process will now be used to investigate symptomatic points in the transformation of our topos.

II

As a way of characterizing this event—of a newly emergent temporality—we will use a statement from Tocqueville. His entire work is laden with the tension of the modern breaking free of the continuity of an earlier mode of time: “As the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity.”³¹ This dictum refers to rejection of tra-

ditional experience. Behind this is concealed a complex process whose course is in part invisible and gradual, sometimes sudden and abrupt, and which is ultimately driven forward consciously.

Begriffsgeschichte, as practiced here, serves as a preliminary means for determining the nature of this process. It can show how shifting semantic relations break up and distort our topos as it is handed down. Only through this process does the idiom gain its own history; but at the same time, this history does away with its peculiar truth.

To begin in the German language area, there first occurred a terminological displacement that emptied the older topos of meaning, or at least furthered this. The naturalized foreign word *Historie*—which primarily meant a report, an account of what had occurred, and in a specialized sense identified the “historical sciences”—was rapidly displaced in the course of the eighteenth century by the word *Geschichte*. Since around 1750, the turn from *Historie* toward *Geschichte* is detectable and emphatic enough to be statistically measurable.³² But *Geschichte* principally signified an event, that is, the outcome of actions either undertaken or suffered; the expression referred more to an incident than to an account of it. To be sure, *Geschichte* had for a considerable time implied such an account, just as *Historie* referred to an event.³³ Each was colored by the other. But this mutual limitation (which Barthold Niebuhr tried in vain to reverse) led to the development of an emphasis peculiar to the German language. *Geschichte* assumed the sense of history and drove *Historie* out of general linguistic usage. As history (*Geschichte*) converged as event and representation, the linguistic basis was laid for the transcendent turning point leading to the historical philosophy of idealism. *Geschichte* as the context of action was incorporated into its knowledge. Droysen’s formula that history is only knowledge of history is the result of this development.³⁴ This convergence to a dual meaning led naturally to a change in the meaning of *Historie* as *vitae magistra*.

History as unique event or as a universal relation of events was clearly not capable of instructing in the same manner as history in the form of exemplary account. The scholarly boundaries of rhetoric, history, and ethics were undermined, and thus the old formula gained new forms of experience from the new linguistic usage. Luden, for example, argued that the weight of proof in historical teachings consisted, if anything, in the events themselves. As he wrote in 1811, such proof depended on the fact that “it is really history (*Geschichte*) itself which speaks there. . . . It is up to each person to either make use of its lessons or neglect them.”³⁵ History gained a new dimension which deprived accounts of their coherence; history was always “more” than

any account made of it. If, then, history could speak only for itself, a further step was possible which completely flattened the formula and rendered it a tautological shell. “One just learns history from history,” commented Radowitz sarcastically, in turning Hegel’s phrase back on Hegel.³⁶ This particular verbal conclusion was not the only one which—not by accident—was suggested by linguistic usage. A political opponent of Radowitz lent the old formula a new and direct sense by making use of the ambiguity of the German word: “The genuine teacher is history itself, not written history.”³⁷ Thus history (*Geschichte*) is instructive only to the degree that one does without its written representation (*Historie*). All three variants demarcated a new experiential space within which the old *Historie* had to revoke its claim to be *magistra vitae*. Although it survived, it lost this claim to *Geschichte*.

This brings us to a second point. We have negligently spoken of history, or of “history itself,” in the emphatic singular, without related subject or object. This curious expression, which today is quite usual, dates from the second half of the eighteenth century. To the degree that *Geschichte* displaced *Historie*, so the former assumed a different character. Initially, and in order to emphasize the new meaning, one spoke freely of history in and for itself, of history pure and simple, of history itself—from History. Droysen later resumed this process with the words “beyond histories there is History.”³⁸

One cannot underestimate the linguistic concentration upon one concept that has taken place since about 1770. Since the French Revolution, history has become a subject furnished with divine epithets of omnipotence, universal justice, and sanctity. The “work of history,” to employ the words of Hegel, becomes a driving force dominating men and shattering their identity. Here as well, the German language had made some preparations. The semantic abundance and contemporary novelty of the word *Geschichte* derived from the fact that it concerned a collective singular. Up until the middle of the eighteenth century, the expression *die Geschichte* generally prevailed in the plural. Taking a typical example from 1748, Jablonski’s *Allgemeines Lexikon der Künste und Wissenschaften* informs us that “*die Geschichte* are a mirror for virtues and vices in which one can learn through assumed experience what is to be done or left undone; they are a monument to evil as well as praiseworthy deeds.”³⁹ What we hear in this example is the usual definition, which is characteristic; it is bound up with a plurality of additive individual histories, just as Bodin wrote his *Methodus ad facilem cognitionem historiarii* for the better knowledge of *historiarum*, of histories in the plural.

In the German language, then, *Geschichte(n)*—from the singular forms *das Geschichte* and *die Geschicht*⁴⁰—were both plural forms, referring to a corresponding number of individual examples. It is really interesting to follow the imperceptible and unconscious manner in which, ultimately with the aid of extensive theoretical reflection, the plural form *die Geschichte* condensed into a collective singular. It was first lexically noted in 1775 by Adelung, in anticipation of the coming development.⁴¹ Just three years later, a reviewer in the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* complained of the way in which the new *Geschichte*, empty of all narrative or exemplary meaning, had spread: “The fashionable word *Geschichte* represents a formal misuse of the language, since in the text [under review] we find only *stories (Erzählungen)* in the main.”⁴²

This usage, which effectively marked out history, separating it from all repeatable exemplary power, was due not least to a shift in the boundary distinguishing history and poetics. Increasingly, historical narrative was expected to provide the unity found in the epic derived from the existence of Beginning and End.⁴³ Past facts could only be translated into historical reality in their passage through consciousness. This became clear in the dispute on Pyrrhonism.⁴⁴ As Chladenius said, only in “rejuvenated images” can *Geschichte* be recounted.⁴⁵ As greater representative art was required of *Historie*—whereby it was expected to elicit secret motives, rather than present chronological series, create a pragmatic structure for the establishment of an internal order out of accidental occurrences—so then poetic demands entered into *Historie*. This became subject to demand for intensified reality long before it was able to satisfy such a demand. It persisted in the form of a collection of ethical examples, although with the devaluation of this role, the value of *res factae* shifted with respect to *res fictae*. An unmistakable index of the propagation of the new historical consciousness of reality is the fact that, conversely, stories and novels proclaimed themselves “true histories” (*histoire veritable, wahrhaftige Geschichte*).⁴⁶ In this fashion, they participated in the increased claim to truth on the part of real history, a degree of truth which had been withheld from *Historie* from Aristotle to Lessing.⁴⁷ Thus the demands of history and poetics folded together; the one penetrated the other so that light could be cast on the immanent meaning of *Geschichte*.

Leibniz, who still conceived of historical writing and poetry as arts of moral instruction, could view the history of humanity as God’s novel, whose point of departure was the Creation.⁴⁸ This idea was taken up by Kant, who used the term “novel” (*Roman*) metaphorically so that the natural unity of general history might be allowed to emerge. At a time when universal his-

tory, composed of a summation of singular histories, transformed into “world history,” Kant sought the means by which the planless “aggregate” of human actions could be transposed into a rational “system.”⁴⁹ Clearly, it was the collective singular of *Geschichte* that rendered such thoughts capable of expression, irrespective of whether it was a matter of world history or of individual history. Thus, for example, Niebuhr announced under this title his lectures on the history of the era of the French Revolution, arguing that only the Revolution had lent “epic unity to the whole.”⁵⁰ It was history (*Geschichte*) conceived as a system that made possible an epic unity that disclosed and established internal coherence.

The centuries-old dispute between history and poetics was finally dissolved by Humboldt when he derived the peculiarity of “history in general” from its formal structure. Following Herder, he introduced the categories of “strength” and “tendency,” categories which continually escape their givenness. He thereby denied all naively accepted material exemplarity of past instances and drew a general conclusion for historical writing on any theme: “The writer of history who is worthy of such a name must represent each incident as part of a whole or, what amounts to the same thing, within each incident illuminate the form of history in general.”⁵¹ He thus reinterpreted a criterion of epic representation and transformed it into a category of the Historical.

The collective singular permitted yet a further step. It made possible the attribution to history of the latent power of human events and suffering, a power that connected and motivated everything in accordance with a secret or evident plan to which one could feel responsible, or in whose name one could believe oneself to be acting. This philological event occurred in a context of epochal significance: that of the great period of singularization and simplification which was directed socially and politically against a society of estates. Here, Freedom took the place of freedoms, Justice that of rights and servitudes, Progress that of progressions (*les progrès*, the plural) and from the diversity of revolutions, “The Revolution” emerged. And with respect to France, one might add that the central place the Revolution in its singularity occupies in Western thought is, in the German language, assigned to *Geschichte*.

The French Revolution brought to light the concept of history characteristic of the German Historical School. Both of these smashed the preceding models, while at the same time apparently incorporating them. Johannes von Müller, still in Göttingen a follower of the pragmatic instructiveness of his teacher, wrote in 1796: “One does not so much find in history what is to

be done in specific cases (everything is ceaselessly altered by circumstance) as rather the general resultant, or eras and nations." Everything in the world has its own time and place and one should purposefully carry out the tasks handed down by fate.⁵²

The young Ranke reflects the semantic shift by which the given singularity of a universal reality might be subsumed under one concept of history. He wrote *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker* in 1824 and expressly added that this concerned "Geschichten, nicht die Geschichte." He did not, however, dispute the existence of the specific uniqueness of history (*Geschichte*). If an event became the object of and set in motion unique and genuine forces, this set to one side the direct applicability of historical models. Ranke continued: "The task of judging the past for the benefit of future generations has been given to History: the present essay does not aspire to such an elevated task; it merely seeks to show the past as it once was (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*)."⁵³ Ranke increasingly limited himself to the past tense, and only during a temporary departure from this limitation, when he edited the *Historisch-Politische Zeitschrift*, did he resort to the old topos of *historia magistra vitae*.⁵⁴ His conspicuous failure appeared to compromise recourse to the old topos.

It was not the historical view of the world as such that led—above all, in the transmission of our idiom through historiographies founded on natural law⁵⁵—to the abandonment of direct application of its doctrine. It was, rather, that hidden behind the relativization of all events consumed by *historia magistra* was a general experience also shared by those in the camp opposed to the progressives.

This brings us to a third point. It is no accident that in the same decades in which history as a collective singular began to establish itself (between 1760 and 1780), the concept of a philosophy of history also surfaced.⁵⁶ This is the time when conjectural, hypothetical, or alleged histories flourished. Iselin in 1764, Herder in 1774, Köster in 1775, working up the "philosophy of history" for consumption by historical scholars,⁵⁷ did rather limp along behind Western authors. They substantially adopted or transformed western writers. What was common to all, however, was the destruction of the exemplary nature of past events and, in its place, the discovery of the uniqueness of historical processes and the possibility of progress. It is linguistically one and the same event which constituted history in the sense customary today, and on this basis gave rise to a philosophy of history. Whoever makes use of the expression "philosophy of history" must note, wrote Köster, "that this is no special or particular science, as might easily be believed on first sighting

the term. For it is, where a complete section of history (*Historie*), or a whole historical science, is dealt with, nothing more than history (*Historie*) in itself."⁵⁸ History and the philosophy of history are complementary concepts which render impossible any attempt at a philosophization of history; this is an insight which was to be fundamentally lost in the nineteenth century.⁵⁹

The potential similarity and iterability of naturally formed histories was consigned to the past, while History itself was denaturalized and formed into an entity about which, since that time, it has not been possible to philosophize in the way one can about nature. Nature and history could now separate conceptually from each other; the proof of this is that in precisely these decades the old domain of *historia naturalis* is eliminated from the structure of historical sciences: for the French by Voltaire in the *Encyclopédie*, for the Germans by Adelung.⁶⁰

Behind this separation, which was prefigured by Vico and might seem to belong only to the history of the sciences, exists the decisive registration of the discovery of a specific historical temporality. This involves what one might call a temporalization of history, which has since that time detached itself from a naturally formed chronology. Up until the eighteenth century, the course and calculation of historical events was underwritten by two natural categories of time: the cycle of stars and planets, and the natural succession of rulers and dynasties. Kant, in refusing to interpret history in terms of astronomical data and rejecting as nonrational the course of succession, did away with established chronology on the grounds that it provided a guideline that was both annalistic and theologically colored, "as if chronology were not derivative of history, but rather that history must arrange itself according to chronology."⁶¹

The exposure of a time determined solely by history was effected by contemporary historical philosophy long before historicism made use of this idea. The naturalistic basis vanished, and progress became the prime category in which a transnatural, historically immanent definition of time first found expression. Insofar as philosophy conceived history in the singular and as a unitary whole and transposed it in this form into Progress, our topos was inevitably robbed of meaning. With such a history functioning as the solitary source of the education of the human race, it was natural that all past examples lost their force. Individual teachings disappeared into a general pedagogic arrangement. The ruse of reason forbade man to learn directly from history and indirectly forced him toward happiness. This is the progressive conclusion that takes us from Lessing to Hegel: "But what experience and history teach is this—that nations and governments have never learned any-

thing from history or acted upon any lessons they might have drawn from it.”⁶² Or, in the words of an experienced contemporary of Hegel, Abbot Rupert Kornmann: “It is the fate of states as well as of men to become prudent (*klug*) just when the opportunity to be so has disappeared.”⁶³

There is, underlying both statements, not only a philosophical reflection on the properties of historical time, but just as directly the forcible experience of the French Revolution, which seemed to outstrip all previous experience. The extent to which this new historical temporality was based on just this experience was quick to show itself with the revival of the revolution in Spain in 1820. Immediately after the outbreak of unrest, Count Reinhard was prompted by Goethe to make an observation which made the temporal perspective obvious: “You are quite right, dear friend, in what you say on experience. It arrives for individuals always too late, while for governments and peoples it is never available. This is because past experience presents itself concentrated in a single focus, while that which has yet to be experienced is spread over minutes, hours, days, years, and centuries; thus similitude never appears to be the same, for in the one case one sees the whole, and in the latter only individual parts.”⁶⁴ It is not only because transpired events cannot be repeated that past and future cannot be reconciled. Even if they could, as in 1820 with the revival of the revolution, the history that awaits us deprives us of the ability to experience it. A concluded experience is both complete and past, while those to be had in the future decompose into an infinity of different temporal perspectives.

It is not the past but the future of historical time which renders similitude dissimilar. With this Reinhard demonstrated the temporality peculiar to the processual nature of a modern history, whose termination is unforeseeable.

This leads us to another variant of our *topos* which alters itself in the same direction. It frequently occurred in connection with *historia magistra* that the historian did not only have to teach, but also had to form opinions and on the basis of these make judgments. This task was taken up with particular emphasis by enlightened *Historie*, and it became, in the words of the *Encyclopédie*, a *tribunal intègre et terrible*.⁶⁵ Almost stealthily, a historiography which had been making judgments since antiquity turned into a *Historie* that executed its judgments autonomously. Raynal’s work, not the least thanks to the aid of Diderot, testifies to this. The Final Judgment was thereby rendered temporal: “World history is the world’s tribunal.” This phrase of Schiller’s from 1784 quickly entered circulation, already stripped of any historiographic traces and addressing itself to a form of justice contained within

history itself, and embodying all human actions. “Whatever is left undone stays forever undone.”⁶⁶

Prevalent journalistic usages such as the idea of the chastisement of time, or of the spirit of the age to which one had to constantly adjust, constantly evokes the inevitability of the manner in which the Revolution, or the history of mankind, was forced into a confrontation of alternatives.⁶⁷ But this historico-philosophical determination, equivalent to the temporal singularity of history, is only one side from which *historia magistra vitae* was deprived of its potential. Another, by no means weaker, attack came from an apparently opposed direction.

This was that, fourthly, consistent Enlighteners tolerated no allusion to the past. The declared objective of the *Encyclopédie* was to work through the past as quickly as possible so that a new future could be set free.⁶⁸ Once, one knew exempla; today, only rules, said Diderot. “To judge what happens according to what has already happened means, it seems to me, to judge the familiar in terms of the unfamiliar,” deduced Sieyès.⁶⁹ One should not lose the nerve to refuse a turn to history for something that might suit us.⁷⁰ These revolutionaries then supplied in dictionary form a directive to write no more history until the Constitution was completed.⁷¹ The constructibility of history dethroned the older *Historie*, “for in a state like ours, founded on victory, there is no past. It is a creation, in which—as in the creation of the universe—everything that is present is but raw material in the hand of the creator by whom it is transformed into existence.” So crowed one of Napoleon’s satraps.⁷² And so Kant’s forecast was fulfilled in this manner, when he posed the question: “How is history *a priori* possible? Answer: when the soothsayer himself shapes and forms the events that he had predicted in advance.”⁷³

The predominance of history which corresponds quite paradoxically to its constructibility betrays two aspects of the same phenomenon. Since the future of modern history opens itself as the unknown, it becomes plannable—indeed it must be planned. And with each new plan a fresh degree of uncertainty is introduced, since it presupposes a lack of experience. The self-proclaimed authority of “history” grows with its constructibility. The one is founded on the other, and vice versa. Common to both is the decomposition of the traditional experiential space, which had previously appeared to be determined by the past, but which would now break apart.

A byproduct of this historical revolution was that historical writing now became not so much falsifiable as subject to manipulation. With the Restoration there came an 1818 decree forbidding history lessons on the period

1789–1815.⁷⁴ By denying the Revolution and its achievements, it seemed implicitly to adapt itself to the view that repetition of the past was no longer possible. But it sought in vain to trump amnesty with amnesia.

Behind all that has been said up to now: behind the singularization of history, its temporalization, unavoidable superiority, and producibility, can be registered an experiential transformation that permeates our modernity. In this process, *Historie* was shorn of the objective of directly relating to life. Since that time, moreover, experience seemed to teach the opposite. An unassuming witness who summarizes this experience for us is the modest and intelligent Perthes, who wrote in 1823:

If each party were to take turns at governing and organizing institutions, then all would, through their self-made history, become more reasonable and wise. History made by others, no matter how much written about and studied, seldom gives rise to political reasonableness and wisdom: that is taught by experience.⁷⁵

This assessment, within the sphere of the expressive possibility of our topos, represents its complete inversion. Counsel is henceforth to be expected, not from the past, but from a future which has to be made. Perthes' statement was modern, for it took leave of *Historie*, and as a publisher Perthes was able to further it. Historians engaged in a critical reconstruction of the past were at one with progressives who, in agreeing that no further utility was to be gained from the directives of an exemplary *Historie*, consciously placed new models at the forefront of the movement.

This brings us to our last feature, which contains a question. What was common to this new experience, whose uniqueness had previously been determined by the temporalization of history? As Niebuhr, in 1829, announced his lectures on the previous forty years, he shied away from calling them a "History of the French Revolution," for "the Revolution is itself a product of the period. . . . We do indeed lack a general word for the period and in view of this we should like to call it the Epoch of Revolutions."⁷⁶ Behind this dissatisfaction was a recognition that a temporality adequate to history first emerges as something internally differentiated and differentiable. The requisite experience for differentiating time in general is, however, that of acceleration and retardation.

Acceleration, initially perceived in terms of an apocalyptic expectation of temporal abbreviation heralding the Last Judgment,⁷⁷ transformed itself—also from the mid-eighteenth century—into a concept of historical

hope.⁷⁸ This subjective anticipation of a future both desired and to be quickened acquired an unexpectedly solid reality, however, through the process of technicalization and the French Revolution. Chateaubriand drew up while in emigration in 1797 a parallel of the new and the old revolutions, whence he drew conclusions from the past for the future in the usual manner. But he was soon forced to realize that whatever he had written during the day was by night-time already overtaken by events. It seemed to him that the French Revolution led into an unparalleled open future. Thus, thirty years later, Chateaubriand placed himself in a historical relation by republishing his outdated essay, unchanged in substance, but with added notes suggesting progressive constitutional prognoses.⁷⁹

After 1789 a new space of expectation was constituted whose perspective was traced out by points referring back to different phases of the past revolution. Kant was the first to foresee this modern system of historical experience when he established a temporally indeterminate, but nevertheless ultimate, goal for the repetition of revolutionary attempts. "Instruction through frequent experience" of failed projects perfects the course of the Revolution.⁸⁰ Since then historical instruction enters political life once again via the back door of programs of action legitimated in terms of historical philosophy. Mazzini, Marx, and Proudhon can be named as the first revolutionary teachers seeking to apply such lessons. According to party or position, the categories of acceleration and retardation (evident since the French Revolution) alter the relations of past and future in varying rhythm. This principle is what Progress and Historism share in common.

It also becomes comprehensible, against the background of this acceleration, why the writing of contemporary history, *Gegenwartschronik*, was left behind,⁸¹ and why *Historie* failed to keep abreast of an increasingly changing actuality.⁸² In a social world undergoing emphatic change, the temporal dimension within which experience had previously been developed and collected became displaced. Historism—like the historical philosophy of Progress—reacted to this by placing itself in an indirect relation to *Geschichte*. However much the German Historical School conceived itself as concerned with a science of the past, it did nonetheless fully exploit the dual meaning of the word *Geschichte* and seek to elevate history into a reflexive science. Here, the individual case lost its politico-didactic character.⁸³ But History as a totality places the person who has learned to understand it in a state of learning that should work directly on the future. As emphasized by Savigny, history is "no longer merely a collection of examples, but rather the sole path to the true knowledge of our own condition."⁸⁴ Or, as Mommsen

stated in trying to bridge the gulf between past and future: history is no longer a teacher of the art of making political prescriptions, but is “instructive solely in that it inspires and instructs independent creative judgment.”⁸⁵ No matter how scholarly, every past example is always too late. Historism can relate to history only indirectly.⁸⁶ In other words, historism renounces a history which simultaneously suspends the condition of its possibility as a practical-historical science. The crisis of historism coincides with this, but this does not prevent the its survival so long as “*Geschichte*” exists.

Henry Adams was the first to make a serious attempt at dealing methodically with this problem. He developed a theory of movement that dealt simultaneously with Progress and History, and that was specified by his questioning of the structure of historical time. Adams proposed a law of acceleration (as he called it), on the basis of which standards were continually altered, since the acceleration of the future constantly foreshortened resort to the past. Population increased in ever-decreasing intervals; technically-created velocities rose exponentially; the increase of production showed similar tendencies, likewise scientific productivity; life expectancy was rising and hence extending generational span—from these and many other examples that could be freely multiplied, Adams drew the conclusion that one could no longer teach how to behave, but at the most, how to react: “All the teacher could hope for was to teach [the mind] reaction.”⁸⁷