

Manifestos for History

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14 Historiographical criticism

A manifesto

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The writing of history liberates us from history.

Benedetto Croce (after Goethe)

This manifesto is intended to provide a theoretical introduction to a field of historical studies situated at the nexus of the theory and history of historiography which I call 'historiographical criticism'. This notion of criticism is unrelated to the tradition of critical historical reflection, associated with scepticism about the methods of historical cognition, critique of the historical source, the separation of history from myth, and the development of methodology ancillary to history. In its attempt to approach the subject matter of historical texts as a philosophical problem, and thus to relate it to the problems of the cosmos, the world and the human being, this method draws upon nineteenth-century traditions of criticism.

The term 'historiographical criticism' is used here by analogy to 'literary criticism' as understood by its post Second World War theoreticians and practitioners in North America and France. Particularly inspiring has been the work of Northrop Frye (*Anatomy of Criticism, 1957; The Responsibility of the Critic, 1976*) and Roland Barthes (*Criticism and Truth, 1966; SZZ, 1970*). I also draw upon the notions of the cultural critics and philosophers who combine textual criticism with cultural criticism, such as Fredric Jameson (*The Political Unconscious, 1981*), Terry Eagleton (*The Function of Criticism, 1984*), Edward Said (*The World, the Text, and the Critic, 1983*) and Jacques Derrida. The background of my considerations is interdisciplinary cultural studies with its specific critique of contemporary culture and methodological eclecticism, since I consider myself a historiographical critic insofar as I consider myself a cultural critic.

Reflection on historiographical practice has occasionally used the term 'historiographical criticism'. Friedrich Schlegel embarked on an analysis of history writing in his commentary on Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795). Much later, in his *History as the Story of Liberty*, Benedetto Croce spoke of 'the criticism of historical works' but did not undertake the kind of study I propose here. Contemporary

literary critics discuss the classic works of historiography written in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, assuming that with the passage of time the classical historical work enters the canon of world literature (Leo Braudy, *Narrative Form in History and Fiction*, 1970), Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973), Lionel Gossman's *Between History and Literature* (1990), Ann Rigney's *The Rhetoric of Historical Representation* (1991) and Philippe Carrard's *Poetics of the New History* (1992) as well as the works of Susanne Gearhart and Linda Orr can be seen as examples of historiographical criticism in the broad sense of the term. None of these authors, however, conceptualises his/her work as historiographical criticism and all of them follow goals and use methods different from those I propose here. Following in White's footsteps, the works listed above discuss the ways of representing the past in terms of the discursive conventions governing texts. Thus, Rigney describes her analyses as 'the rhetoric of historical representations', whereas White and Carrard speak of 'the poetics of historical writing' rather than criticism, even though they are clearly inspired by contemporary literary criticism. The definition of 'historiographical criticism', its assumptions, goals, and methods, has not, so far, been provided.

Crisis – criticality – chance

The etymology of the words 'criticality' and 'crisis' is the same. The meaning of the Greek κρίσιμος, κρίσις, κρίσις, κρίσις, κρίσις, κρίσις, κρίσις, κρίσις) includes judgement, assessment, evaluation and being determined. Used by Hippocrates in his medical works, the word κρίσις (*krisis*) means the turning point of the disease, the 'critical day' (Aristotle), a sudden change which determines the patient's future condition. In this sense, the word 'critical' was synonymous with crisis, meaning both the turning point and the crucial moment. Another concept can be brought into play here, namely καιρός (*kairós*), one meaning of which is critical time. Apart from that, καιρός (*kairós*) means the right time, the appropriate moment, chance or opportunity. Furthermore, crisis, the critical moment and chance are associated with becoming at a particular point in time, being-in-the-now, the present, the accumulation of moments fraught with meaning.

These etymological considerations are relevant to my argument insofar as I believe that the concept of 'historiographical criticism' as formulated here is itself the product of a critical moment in my discipline, that is, the theory and history of historiography, as well as in history as a field of study. This crisis results from the postmodern deconstruction of the fundamental categories of modern thinking. In the context of that critique, history as an academic discipline is regarded as the child of modernity and positivism, and an ideology supporting the institution of the nation state. Scholars are aware that to predict the end of the modern era is to predict the end of history as the dominant, specifically Western European, approach to the past.

Defining historiographical criticism

Historiographical criticism is an interpretative practice, a certain method of interpreting history writing, and an instrument of understanding historical studies. In this sense, historiographical criticism is a hermeneutics.

Historiographical criticism is not a theory in the positivist sense of the term.¹ Inherently open, criticism does not produce a system or model; by contrast, theory is an essentially closed structure. In a sense, theory kills criticism, limiting interpretation to a certain pattern. Nevertheless, criticism does not stand in opposition to theory but is a supratheoretical phenomenon which tests various theories and therefore can assess their usefulness for a given community. Thus, in a way, theory functions as an 'immediate metarext', but one that does not aspire to dominate other approaches.

The starting point of historiographical criticism is in the analyses of contemporary historiography, especially works representing the trends which in my *Microhistories* I called 'alternative history', pointing to their distinctiveness from traditional historiography which is grounded upon the positivist model of historical studies.² Thus, alternative history includes books published in the 1970s and 1980s whose authors manifest an enhanced sensitivity to the problems of the contemporary world and draw inspiration from other fields of the contemporary humanities. Their works, therefore, reflect – more directly than the works of traditional historians – the fundamental issues of the contemporary humanities, such as subjectivity, ethics and the relationship between power and knowledge. These are also the primary concerns of historiographical criticism which deals with alternative history.

The historical work which is subjected to historiographical criticism is not treated as a (positivistic) scientific study but as a literary and philosophical work. The historiographical critic is not interested in the factual content of the work or the truth value of the facts and the manner of explaining them, however important these may be. Rather, following Roland Barthes, the critic's concern is the accuracy of the critical statement, based upon 'the critic's responsibility for his/her own word'. The critic is a 'reader-writer' whose deep reading of the text deconstructs the world of the book in order to reconstruct it. Historiographical criticism does not discover meaning but creates it. Like Umberto Eco, Barthes believes in the open work which has multiple meanings. The critic chooses some of those meanings and interprets them, thereby adding, as it were, another chapter to the book and continuing the work's metaphors rather than simplifying them. The goal of criticism is not to control the text, but to liberate its meanings. Thus, historiographical criticism is not governed by a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' but a 'hermeneutics of care', where care is understood as a requisite element of criticism and at the same time as a desirable social practice which underlies criticism. Accordingly, historiographical criticism is interested in care for the future, an interest manifested in demonstrating the possible effects on reality of different conceptions of the past.

Historiographical criticism contains elements of both description and evaluation. The blurring of distinctions between the two kinds of activity indicates that every historical description involves evaluation. Historiographical criticism describes the condition of contemporary historiography, but it is not its task to compile a list of historical works which would form a canon that determines the methods of study or the style of writing about the past. Neither is its purpose to review historical works. Rather, the main function of historiographical criticism as I see it is to refresh and renew our ways of thinking about history, understood, to stress it again, as a specifically Western European approach to the past. The goal of historiographical criticism is, therefore, to offer new perspectives on history writing, its place and role at the 'critical moment' in the history of culture and the human being. Accordingly, the essential act of historiographical criticism is, to quote Fye, 'not an act of judgment but of recognition'³ which can help us evaluate ourselves and our condition. Paraphrasing the title of Richard Rorty's book, I would say that historiographical criticism is interested in 'historiography as a mirror of culture', and above all in the human individual who looks at him/herself in this mirror and sees there a reflection of his/her face; in other words, it is interested in historiography as a critique of culture.

In the case of the theory and history of historiography, the process of creating the future to which, hopefully, historiographical criticism can contribute would involve the following strategies: historicisation of history (stressing the emergence of history as a historical fact and demonstrating its changes and transitoriness); textualisation and discursivisation of thinking about history (understanding such notions as history, science, objectivity, the state, time, space and gender as 'linguistic events' that belong to the order of discourse fostered by modern thinking rather than to reality, as such); and emphasis on history's connections with ideology and politics (following Foucault's analysis of the links between knowledge and power), where history is treated as an ideology subservient to the Western European philosophy of violence. By using the above strategies, historiographical criticism contributes to the reflection on the subject and subjectivity,⁴ essential for the contemporary humanities, and joins in the so-called ethical turn which has shifted the main focus of theoretical considerations about history from epistemology to ethics.⁵

Ethics is of key importance for historiographical criticism and is not understood as a set of abstract rules but as the product of the student's own everyday experience. Historiographical criticism combines a close reading of texts with ethical reflection which reaches beyond the text. Ethics becomes the practice of care.

The methods of historiographical criticism

In its analyses of contemporary history writing, historiographical criticism favours epistemological pluralism. Its main method is, on the one hand, close

reading of texts as adopted from formalism, structuralism and psychoanalysis, and, on the other, 'interpretive eclecticism'. This method clearly demonstrates that interpretation is an interdisciplinary practice grounded upon a constant transgression of the boundaries of a given discipline and the breaking of traditional interpretative frameworks. In this context eclecticism, far from being undesirable, is a prerequisite for the emergence of new ways of study and interpretation, and a potential basis for a future integration of knowledge.

Historiographical criticism provides an alternative to the conventional scientific model of theoretical reflection. It draws inspiration not only from analytical philosophy and the philosophy of science but from a variety of disciplines, trends and approaches, such as structuralism and poststructuralism, deconstruction, semiotics, feminist epistemology, postcolonial studies, psychoanalysis, Marxism and neo-Marxism, new sociology, reflexive anthropology, etc. Such eclecticism and pluralism is grounded upon Fye's idea of 'letting the mind play freely around a subject (the object of study)'.⁶

At this point we must address the question of the limits or the frameworks of interpretation, the question of the 'ethics of analysis'. It must be stressed that endorsing the idea of multiple meanings of texts and of the impossibility of a definitive interpretation does not mean that every interpretation is equally acceptable. The student's decision to use a given theory, interpretative category, or way of thinking is related to his/her world-view, existential situation, and the choice of intellectual tradition that corresponds to his/her view of the world and the human being. On the deep level, therefore, the choice of method is an existential and ethical choice. Speaking of the limits of interpretation, I refer to Max Weber's concept of 'the ethics of responsibility'.⁷ At the same time, I realise that the problem of the 'ethics of analysis' and the limits of representation is an *aporia*, touching upon the dilemma of being situated between the freedom of choice and the abstract ideals or accepted values which impose constraints on that freedom.

The functions of historiographical criticism

Historiographical criticism has three main functions: descriptive-analytical, 'prophetic' and performative. Let me examine each of these.

Descriptive and analytical function

As I have argued above, the starting point of historiographical criticism is the analysis ('close reading') of historical works and the description of the state of contemporary historiography. The historiographical critic is a 'textual psychoanalyst' who seeks the most interesting meanings in those levels of the text which Barthes termed 'the unconscious of discourse'. The critic thus has to find ways into the text, crevices leading to hidden meanings. In other words, the critic wants to discover the secret of the work. Those crevices, the

hidden doors of the text, can be found in metaphors, in form, style, subject matter and its treatment, or the historian's position in his/her own narrative. A study of those characteristics can reveal the historian's assumptions which induce him or her to address a particular topic in a particular fashion.

'Prophetic' function

Historiographical criticism is related to rapid cultural change and the crisis caused, among other things, by globalisation. In view of those changes, the primary goal of historiographical criticism would be – as Frye suggested with reference to literary criticism – to identify in contemporary history writing such elements as could be deemed 'prophetic'. The historiographical critic analyses visions of the past proposed by the historian and remains aware that debates about these visions actually concern the future concept of the world and the human being. In this sense historiographical criticism is avant-garde criticism asking, 'What are the implications of historians' notions of the past and what are their possible consequences?'

In this context the historiographical critic may be dubbed 'prophetic critic' or 'herald' who does not foretell the future on the basis of some super-naturally received knowledge or his/her own superhuman powers, but who, as Deborah J. Haynes says, *forthells* it. The critic analyses the present and the current historiographical visions of the past, indicating the potential future results of present actions and voicing the fears and hopes of the community s/he lives in.⁸

By repeating, highlighting or quoting certain ideas, motifs, symbols and metaphors that circulate in a particular community, the 'prophetic critic' becomes a vehicle of cultural memory instrumental in transcending the present stage of the community's development and extending its 'horizon of expectations'.⁹ The main task of the historiographical critic is to recognise the prophetic elements in contemporary history writing, the elements that might be regarded as signs of the future. In this context historiographical criticism would function as ethical criticism on the one hand, and social and political criticism on the other, which means that it would be concerned with the present condition of the human being, society and culture, and with the present as history. Such criticism is a mode of communication, a medium of dialogue between the past and the present, the latter oriented towards the future. The critic asks, 'What happened in the past and was presented in a given way in the historical work, and remains of significance to the present and the creation of the future?'

Performative function

Historiographical criticism is performative in nature. In the present argument interpretation is conceived as a performative act since, as I have claimed, one of its goals is to participate in the change of historical consciousness; to

prepare the ground for the emergence of some 'post-historical' approach to the past which would correspond to the 'horizon of expectations' of an audience living in the new millennium and a global culture. Rather than asking what a text means, historiographical criticism endows the text with agency and asks what it does. Its target audience is the younger generation, who, after this 'critical bite', will hopefully no longer perceive history in the traditional manner. The performative function of historiographical criticism is important from the pedagogical point of view insofar as it teaches students to think critically and to look for hidden assumptions underlying a given piece of writing. Historiographical criticism clearly demonstrates that different interpretative strategies produce different visions of the past and that it is impossible to write about history without adopting some ideological attitude.

Interpretations formulated by historiographical criticism will always be 'performative interpretations', to use Jacques Derrida's phrase (*Specters of Marx*, 1993). They transform what they interpret rather than merely commenting on the text or aspiring to restore it to its 'original' meaning. Therefore, as Derrida points out, the performative act of interpretation is related to Karl Marx's '11th Thesis on Feuerbach'. Historiographical criticism paraphrases that thesis, claiming that: 'historians have only described and interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to realize how interpretation can change it'.¹⁰

Notes

- 1 It is often observed that the concept of literary criticism and its relation to theory is ambiguous. See Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Richard Freadman, Seumas Miller, *Rethinking Theory: A Critique of Contemporary Literary Theory and an Alternative Account* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- 2 Ewa Domanska, *Microhistorie: Spotkania w mne, dzys wiatkach* [Microhistories: Encounters in-between worlds] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1997).
- 3 See Northrop Frye, 'The Responsibility of the Critic', *Modern Language Notes* 91: 5 (October 1976): 810.
- 4 Historiographical criticism may be said to emerge from the problem of subjectivity. The primary function of history is that of the guarantor and guard of identity. Thus, arguably, we will find history useful as long as we continue to believe that it plays a role in shaping, guaranteeing and sanctioning our identity, whether racial or ethnic, sexual or class, national, continental or global. Belief in history means belief in a coherent subject and its fixed identity. One reason for the present disbelief in the usefulness of history is the disintegration of such a stable historical subject, i.e., a subject that has gained and developed its identity by reference to tradition and to the past preserved in history.
- 5 See Lawrence Buell, 'In Pursuit of Ethics', *PMLA* 114: 1 (January 1999); Michael Eskin, 'The Double "Turn" to Ethics and Literature?' *Poetics Today* 25: 4 (Winter 2004); Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack (eds), *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001); Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).

- 6 Northrop Frye, 'Polemical Introduction', in his *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973): 3.
- 7 Weber distinguishes two basic maxims which form the ground for any ethical action: 'ethics of conviction' (*Gesinnungsethisch*) and 'ethics of responsibility' (*Verantwortungsethisch*). The former refers to one's beliefs and focuses on maintaining them (for example, one should, at all costs, object to an unjust social order), while the latter foregrounds responsibility for one's own actions and is aware of human imperfection and its unpredictable consequences. Weber argues, however, that 'the ethics of conviction does not amount to lack of responsibility, nor does the ethics of responsibility amount to lack of convictions' and that the two cannot be reconciled (Max Weber, 'The Profession and Vocation of Politics', in *Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Lassman and Roland Speers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)).
- 8 The terms 'prophetic critic' and 'prophetic criticism' were introduced by Deborah J. Haynes in her *The Vocation of the Artist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). This concept brings to mind Friedrich von Schlegel's well-known statement that 'the historian is a prophet looking backwards' (*der Historiker ist ein rückwärts gekehrter Prophet*).
- 9 Reinhart Koselleck, 'Space of Experience' and 'Horizon of Expectation', in his *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985).
- 10 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994): 51.