

History and the Act of Reading

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[1] Reverse Approach Toward History

The historical field as an object of analysis does not emerge spontaneously from the detailed observation of data; prior to this, there already exists a sketched plan of the whole constructed from recognizable figures inside the historian, whereby the events are sewn together with a rhetorical yarn to create historical coherence, keeping the continuity of each event within that whole plan. This concept, presented by Hayden White in 1973⁽¹⁾, so far seems to have been slowly accepted by many. If historical writing seems to be a reproduction of the historical past, what we see in it are the effects of reality conceived through the rhetorical formation of historical writing itself.

Once this is conceded, the dimension of the “archive”⁽²⁾ that historians have usually dealt with as a storage of evidence of historical facts should be put into question. The archive rather appears to be a system, which according to its proper logic, enables one to collect, classify and make reference to other texts. Since historical research is no more than the act of reconstructing past events through the handling of texts, it cannot be totally free from the archive system that restricts the texts themselves. This system affects the process of constructing fictional figures made up of representations and transforms them into historical fact. To begin a critical approach to history then, one will have to ascertain what the archive tries to produce and how it tries to produce

historical meanings.

Once we put ourselves in this location, a critical approach to the archive or a “reverse” approach becomes possible. How does the archival process operate? Why is such a fiction considered to be historical fact and oftentimes never put into doubt? What has been the historical role of this process? Are there any figures excluded from the historical arena that is dominated by this fiction? If there are, who, how and why? The aim of discourse analysis is to reveal how the functions of such a system of archives are tied to knowledge, and how it produces power through a productive process of meanings which are characterized as self-evident and defined as fact. Edward Said’s classic work, *Orientalism*, is one of the earliest examples of such an analysis⁽³⁾.

[2] Linguistic Acts of Text

As a criticism of positivist method, this “reverse” approach toward historical fact is indubitably effective. But for a textual analysis, is it really enough to just carry out an analysis of discourse? Obviously it is indispensable to disclose the arbitrariness or ideology of a totalizing apparatus. For that purpose, it is necessary to reveal the inter-action between codes, rhetorics, ideologies and texts through critical readings. However, inside the text, aren’t there only traces that such an apparatus is at work? Is seeing just how powerful and monolithic the dominant discourse is all we can see in a text? In short, is it true that all we can do through textual analysis is just prove, confirm and *describe* the colossal nature of dominant power?

Discourse and the archive system have an autonomous closed structure, and they try to connect what exists outside of their system to interpretive meanings. Nonetheless, within the text, isn’t there something concealed that

is not contained within classificatory codes or interpretive grids, which the archive system coerces?

We might not forget that a text is nothing other than a linguistic practice. Text is not just an effect made up of fixed meanings. Rather, what is inscribed in the text are forces that make language come into play, and also the performative *process* of the text's desire. The conflictual process that arises from the effects of language trying to grasp, rationalize, normalize and enclose incomprehensible objects might be inscribed in the text. There might still remain something that is irreducible to the transformative "working up" into interpretive object.

The historian Carlo Ginzburg is one of the few who tried to work through these problems. He sees this issue as one of finding his way through the rigid confrontation between two irreconcilable epistemological positions concerning evidence and reality: one—let's call this the positivist position—sees evidence as a transparent window which lets us directly approach reality; and the other, called the "skeptical position" (obviously referring to H. White's position), sees evidence as a "wall" which shuts us out from any kind of possibility to approach reality. Ginzburg rejects both of these as unacceptable. Rather, he tries to see evidence as a distorted glass that lets us refer to figures outside the text, but only under the condition of a strict analysis of its internal codes, which are concerned with the formation of the evidence itself⁽⁴⁾.

How is this accomplished? Referring to Walter Benjamin's famous expression of "brushing history against the grain (*die Geschichte gegen den Strich zu bürsten*)", Ginzburg describes his reading strategy as "read[ing] the evidence against the grain, against the intentions of those who had produced it. Only in this way will it be possible to take into account, against the tendency of the relativists to ignore the one or the other, power relationships as well as

what is irreducible to them⁽⁵⁾.”

Renouncing the concept of text as a totally cooperative, previously harmonized, monolithic place where the writer's will penetrates and dominates completely, he throws light on the different dimensions of text. He reads text as the place where the relations between representer and represented appear to be discordant, suppressive, submissive, interceptive, deviant, and even subversive⁽⁶⁾. Because in these *ab-normal* (outside-of-norm) parts, woven inside of the normalizing forces of the text, the limits of a rhetorical encoding function are represented, as well as that which is irreducible to the archive system. Ginzburg affirms: “It was not my intention to identify a fake, but to demonstrate that the *hors-texte*, what is outside the text, is also *in* the text, nestling in its folds: we have to discover it, and make it talk⁽⁷⁾.”

Similar concerns are displayed by Gayatri C. Spivak. Citing Jacques Derrida's expression “*thought* is ... the blank part of the text,” she affirms “that which is thought is, if blank, still *in* the text and must be consigned to the Other of history. That inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an interpretable text is what a postcolonial critic of imperialism would like to see developed within the European enclosure as *the* place of the production of theory⁽⁸⁾.” The interests toward the critical analysis of “*text-inscribed* blankness” (Spivak) seems to be what Ginzburg shared partly, who acknowledges his task as mentioned above.

[3] Text-Woven Fray—An example

The tiny fray of text sometimes appears under trivial circumstances. Let me give a small example. While reading the writings of British travelers who came to Argentina in the 19th century, I occasionally encountered weird

descriptions they got from local guides. The traveler = writer records questions enunciated for the purpose of bringing out a preconceived response from the native guide, and also records the utterance he obtained from that guide. And as it would be, occasionally the guide's enunciation is recorded, in Spanish as is, without any interpretation or explanation, which is rare in these travel writings' usually elucidative style. The writer displays perplexity towards his incomprehension of what that utterance means and how to interpret it. These descriptions suggest that the guide's words do not accord with the writer's preconceived notions, but rather go in unforeseen directions. The fact that they are inscribed inside the text of English travelers seemed important to me.

What is the function of such a "gap of address" in travel writing? First of all, as Mary L. Pratt points out by calling them "capitalist vanguard" writings⁽⁹⁾, these texts are not free from colonial discursive formation as many other travel writings emerged in European journeys to non-European worlds. Pratt characterizes "capitalist vanguard" discourse as follows: "The bottom line in the discourse of the capitalist vanguard was clear: América must be transformed into a scene of industry and efficiency; its colonial population must be transformed from an indolent, undifferentiated, uncleanly mass lacking appetite, hierarchy, taste, and cash, into wage labor and a market for metropolitan consumer goods⁽¹⁰⁾."

In the texts written by "capitalist vanguard," there appear representations of the Other, or to borrow Spivak's words, "the self-consolidating other" (and according to her which is synonymous with "epistemic violence")⁽¹¹⁾, convenient for the process of subject construction of the colonial power. In the scene I mentioned above, the interrogation was designed to gather evidence on things such as the danger of the Argentine *pampa* and the barbarity

and cruelty of the native people, but the writer's intention fails in what came out from the guide.

Let me show one specific example. On the way to the southern part of Argentina, British traveler Charles Darwin, who was realizing his voyage mainly on warship *Beagle* commanded by captain Robert Fitz-Roy, found some odd figures while riding on horse in Patagonia region. Darwin, presuming that he unfortunately came up against some enemies, asked the native guide if they were indigenous people who were going to attack him. But the only response he could get from the guide was “*quién sabe.*”

Two days afterwards I again rode to the harbour: when not far from our destination, my companion, the same man as before, spied three people hunting on horseback. He immediately dismounted, and watching them intently, said, “They don't ride like Christians, and nobody can leave the fort.” The three hunters joined company, and likewise dismounted from their horses. At last one mounted again and rode over the hill out of sight. My companion said, “We must now get on our horses: load your pistol,” and he looked to his own sword. I asked, “Are they Indians?”—“*Quien [sic] sabe?* (who knows?) if there are no more than three, it does not signify.” It then struck me, that the one man had gone over the hill to fetch the rest of his tribe. I suggested this; but all the answer I could extort was, “*Quien sabe?*”⁽¹²⁾

The phrase “*quién sabe*” is strange since it enables two antithetical readings simultaneously. Before this description, the writer had emphasized how the place he was traveling in was dangerous because of the strained relations between brutal indigenous people and the semi-barbarous local government,

mixing in his speculations and convictions. Such explanation describes the perilous character of the *pampa* and serves as a constative⁽¹³⁾ expression inside the text. It follows faithfully the structure of the text to keep its consistency in accordance with the whole plot of the travel writing. However, the insertion of the enunciation of “quién sabe” causes instability.

Basically this “quién sabe” is an interrogative sentence meaning something like “who knows.” Trying to take this most directly and simply, the listener/reader can understand it as a question. But on the other hand, it also becomes “no one knows” as a response to “who the hell knows.” Thus, here it comes to say “no one knows, *therefore* it is useless to ask,” and turns out to be a performative expression, denying the validity of the questioning act itself and ordering the questioner to abandon it⁽¹⁴⁾.

This description, fundamentally belongs to two different reading levels, and brings about confronting indications or a double bind, going against the desire to compose the text as a set of constative enunciations. Such gap in address makes the description deviate from the purposive plot and eludes the system of translation. Then the text is compelled to describe this gap as a conflict within linguistic regulations. In this instance, the text fails to become harmonized into a homogeneous place filled with colonial desire toward the Other.

[4] Rhetorical Limit of Representation

More than such a function itself, what is important is the sort of crack the words bring into the text. “Quién sabe” doesn’t admit of any kind of understanding or sympathy or antipathy toward the guide’s thinking at that moment. Even without conjecturing as to whether the guide is thinking some-

thing or not thinking at all, this enunciation excavates an aperture inside the text, which is surrounded by interpretable objects. The desire to construct the colonial other using the local guide's utterance as evidence fails to be accomplished.

This is a tiny crack brought into the text by what encoding logic powerfully works to eliminate, and rather slips out of this logic. Here might be displayed the very limit of the function of letting language work to produce meanings, to construct "the non-European Argentine" as a different but unified identity. In that liminal space, there might be represented the traces of those who evade the referential code of the archive system.

The point is to take account of both processes in one text simultaneously: that of the normalizing suppressing power and that of what eludes it, which is achieved only by expanding our reading to what is excluded from the text. I may call this reading method "contrapuntal reading," using Edward Said's expression in his work *Culture and Imperialism*, but in a larger sense⁽¹⁵⁾. One of the merits of this "contrapuntal reading" is that it discloses the epistemological oppression of constructing the other by colonial discourse. And at the same time it shows us that this oppression produces "resistance" from *uncanny*—in Freudian sense of the word—figures for colonial desire, and it gets exposed in the text as obsession. This "resistance" is something that cannot be articulated in-itself. It is parasitic to the colonial text, seducing us to deconstruct it from inside. Now, it is our response to this seduction that awaits.

* This paper is based on the paper read in a workshop at Cornell University on September 19, 2003. Afterward I have revised it and changed some parts.

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Notes

- (1) "Before the historian can bring to bear upon the data of the historical field the conceptual apparatus he will use to represent and explain it, he must first *prefigure* the field—that is to say, constitute it as an object of mental perception," says Hayden White in his work *Metahistory*. He continues: "[B]efore a given domain can be interpreted, it must first be construed as a ground inhabited by discernible figures. The figures, in turn, must be conceived to be classifiable as distinctive orders, classes, genera, and species of phenomena. Moreover, they must be conceived to bear certain kinds of relationships to one another, the transformations of which will constitute the 'problems' to be solved by the 'explanations' provided on the levels of emplotment and argument in the narrative." He also notes, "in order to figure 'what *really* happened' in the past, therefore, the historian must first *prefigure* as a possible object of knowledge the whole set of events reported in the documents." Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore & London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 30.
- (2) I use "archive" to refer the general system of formation and transformation of *énoncés* as well as the whole of regulations of *discours*.
- (3) Regarding to the relationship between knowledge and power, Said writes in *Orientalism*: "[Orientalism] is an *elaboration* ... of a whole series of 'interests' which, by this means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will or intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (...) world; it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (...), power intellectual (...), power cultural (...), power moral (...)." Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin Books, 1978), p. 12.
- (4) Carlo Ginzburg, "Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian," *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (Autumn 1991), pp. 83–84.
- (5) Carlo Ginzburg, *History, Rhetoric, and Proof* (Hanover & London, University Press of New England, 1999), p. 24.
- (6) The strategy of Ginzburg's "against the grain" reading practice seems to be very close to the radical speech act theory presented by Mary Louise Pratt. Questioning the orthodox point of view such as Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle, she demonstrates her unique reading strategy. She writes: "At present, the speech-act view of the pact between the reader and author is one of rational cooperation

toward shared objectives. But just as one must question the notion of cooperation in other contexts, so one must do for literature. One must be able to talk about reader/text/author relations that are coercive, subversive, conflictive, submissive, as well as cooperative, and about relations that are some or all of these simultaneously or at different points in a text. Such developments would considerably enrich the speech-act account of avant garde texts, and of 'resisting readings' (...) of the sort discussed by many feminist critics." "Resisting readings," the expression borrowed from Judith Fetterley's work *The Resisting Reader*, might be effective not only for literary texts but also to other writings such as history. As Pratt mentions, "representative discourse is always engaged in both fitting words to world and fitting world to words," and "[r]epresentative discourses, fictional or nonfictional, must be treated as simultaneously world-creating, world-describing, and world-changing undertakings." Mary Louise Pratt, "Ideology and Speech-Act Theory," *Poetics Today*, vol. 7, n. 1, pp. 70-71.

- (7) Ginzburg, *History, Rhetoric and Proof*, p. 23.
- (8) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in: Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana & Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 294.
- (9) In the 1810s and 1820s many Europeans, mainly British, went to South America, traveled and wrote as advance reconnaissance for European capital. Pratt calls those scouts "capitalist vanguard" which includes a variety of professionals such as engineers, mineralogists, breeders, agronomists and military men. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London & New York, Routledge, 1992), p. 146.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- (11) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge & London, Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 205.
- (12) Charles Darwin, *Journals of Researches Into the Natural History and Geology of the Countries Visited During the Voyage of H. M. S. 'Beagle' Round the World. Under the Command of Capt. Fitz Roy, R. N.* (London, John Murray, 1889), p. 79.
- (13) I use the word "constative" as defined in speech act theory. It is opposite concept to "performative" and refers to the fact-confirming affirmation.
- (14) The similar split into "constative" and "performative" is what Paul de Man demonstrates as "the tension between grammar and rhetoric." He puts an example of "What's the difference," which also produces two meanings mutually exclusive. De Man points out: "[W]e cannot even tell from his grammar whether he 'really' wants to know 'what' difference is or is just telling us that we shouldn't even try to find out. Confronted with the question of the difference between grammar and rhetoric, grammar allows us to ask the question, but the sentence by

means of which we ask it may deny the very possibility of asking. For what is the use of asking, I ask, when we cannot even authoritatively decide whether a question asks or doesn't ask?" Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 9–10.

- (15) In *Culture and Imperialism* Said advocates to read texts "not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts. In the counterpoint of Western classical music, various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one; yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and order, an organized interplay that derives from the themes, not from a rigorous melodic or formal principle outside the work. In the same way, I believe, we can read and interpret English novels, for example, whose engagement (usually suppressed for the most part) with the West Indies or India, say, is shaped and perhaps even determined by the specific history of colonization, resistance, and finally native nationalism." Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage, 1993), pp. 59–60.

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