

HISTORY AND OUR TIMES

INTRODUCTION

Is history at present in a position to sustain the dialogue of our times? Is it not rather, like an album of faded pictures, a curiously anachronistic story for a century infatuated with progress, speed, and productivity?

It is true that the pursuit of historical research is always in evidence and that an interested public still exists for it. More significant perhaps is the historical sensitivity which our epoch attests. This same twentieth century, to which discoveries and innovations of all kinds appeal, likes reconstitutions, encourages prehistorical exhumations, and sees to the accurate restoration and preservation of monuments. Careless restoration would not be countenanced today, nor would the demolitions of the nineteenth century, when, because of a lack of feeling for history, too many precious relics were squandered. This piety does not emanate solely from the aesthetic order. What readily comes to light, emerging from this rubble and its picturesque quality, is the atmosphere of early days, the conditions and even the "states of mind" of men of long ago, as if we still were expecting something from that voice that rises out of the centuries.

This feeling for the past is accompanied by a devaluation of historical science. The nineteenth century was the century of history par excellence because of the high quality of the historians, because of the repercussions

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of archeological “discoveries,” and because of the fervor blended with romanticism with which this encounter with “history” was welcomed. Michelet, Quinet and Renan, Niebuhr, and Ranke were more than mere technicians of history, more than masters of narration or exposition. With them history became the ultimate expression of humanism. For them it was a faith, the revelation of a human order in time. In doing the work of historians, they were working for the improvement of man, for the advent of justice and liberty. The budding twentieth century felt itself borne away by progress toward sunnier climes where peace, abundance, and happiness would mark the end of history.

Since then the event has descended upon us. This euphoria was not proof against two wars of planetary dimensions or against the malevolence, inscribed in flesh, by death camps or scientific massacres. Rather, the entire course of history turns crimson with a sinister glimmer; its realism, suddenly unmasked, presents to our eyes misfortunes, failures, infamies during the course of the centuries, on which greatness or reason sheds but a fugitive light.

In the resentment of a disillusioned era (history is being brought to trial in our times—Spengler or Valéry, Guéhenno, Gide or Sartre) the forms of the accusation vary, but everywhere history is called into question or depreciated. It appears as a relentless power against man, as an awesome evil genius. Many of our contemporaries have come to doubt that history has a meaning.

Although we reject the optimism of earlier days, we do not do so in order to wallow in a pessimism of principle. With the exception of concrete situations which call for pessimism, a sorry disillusion sterilizes that “pessimism of weaklings” denounced by Nietzsche. A “pessimism of strong men” knows itself to be provisional. It sets aside old values, established truths, and false securities, but only to await the truth of new values. We reject the official optimism of yesterday in favor of the myopia of its messianism of peace and happiness. Philosophies of history, despite the caution of Hegel or Marx, inspire us with distrust, because they falsify the historical perspective by setting up as a definitive truth the “views” of a moment. Yet one cannot dismiss all philosophy in order to fall back upon a ready-made artlessness. Let us merely hope that thought will become critical enough to save us from false absolutes and to preserve all the richness of historical reality. In denying that the course of history paves the way for the advent of the ideal city so dear to Marxist dogma, we do not, however, resign ourselves to the absurd and the chaotic. But, in forsaking

those flowered paths where our illusions lay dreaming, we enter a universe where we must fight for justice, agitate for peace, defend liberty. These do not represent indestructible “boons.” They must be won over again and again and protected at every moment. In taking cognizance of this internal exigency, history, emancipated from false ideologies, once again discovers something to say to our times. For every existence derives from history guideposts that help it to ascertain its position in the world and experiences that equip it to meet the challenge of future battles.

HISTORY AND THE PAST

We are all more ancient than ourselves—history reminds us of this each day. We are surrounded by, and we come across in ourselves, a reality which we have not created but which stems from past centuries and presents obstacles or opens up new ways to us. That which is no more still remains present in one form or another, and we are obliged to take it into account. However, the positivist epoch has falsified the perspectives of this relationship with our past.

The years we have just lived through have freed us from the superstition of objectivity. We ourselves are in history. It is what happens to us and our reaction to events; it is what we do with our life. History is ourselves. Outside of time and history, no one can gain access to a bay window whence he could, without risk or emotion, survey the course of events, score the points, and referee the match. To write history is also to realize its existence, to “historicize one’s self.”

The “presence” of the historian in the history he writes, inevitable as it is, is also the condition and the guaranty of a truthful history. His knowledge and his intellectual qualities are not enough. His moral worth, his probity, his breadth of vision, the intensity of his search, as broad an understanding as possible—all this, by guiding his “subjectivity,” insures the validity of his work, his “objectivity.” The best way of exorcising subjectivity wherever it might degenerate into arbitrariness or fantasy, the only true opposition to subjectivism, is not to deny its role in a work of science but to be aware of it.

It is said that history is the “science of the past.” But the error of this commonplace is precisely that it overlooks the distinctive quality of the historical fact: its singularity and its reality as a living experience. The past constricts the men of whom history speaks into puppets with incomprehensible gesticulations. Knowledge acquired about the past by assembling information and records still does not guarantee the capacity to “under-

stand" it. To do so, one would have to penetrate the potentialities, the concerns, and the beliefs of men and to go back with them over part of the road they traveled in their universe. How can an "object" lend itself to a communication of this order? Only a "presence" has something to say to us; it alone can open up to us, tell its tale.

The past with which the historian is concerned is not that which rusts old weapons or lends a patina to outmoded furniture. For man the "truth" of the past constitutes his present. The invasion of the Huns was the calamity of the day for contemporaries. The historian evokes this present buried beneath the past, imbued with its atmosphere of beings and things—a present like our own, vibrant with purpose, concerns, and hopes. The king who attempts to extend his power or his state does so with his eye on the future. Should he limit himself to defending his crown or his kingdom, it is still with the future in mind. History is realized by the advent of this future.

The present takes on purpose, the dream takes shape in the form of enterprises, institutions spring up from decisions made in a day. This "passage" of the future into the present is the way that history is created. Historical "reality" is not a "thing"; its very inconsistency attests that it is essentially "realization," in other words, movement. Lastingness is perceived in a flash of light, and the event in the traces it leaves and in works. History speaks to us of the present, the living, not of the dead. The Greek temple, the Roman cloister, and the châteaux of the Renaissance still convey in hushed tones the presences, plans, the sweetness of life plucked on the wing and bitter struggles to survive.

The past is usually thought of as a continuity, a chain of events leading from a distant past to a near present. On the contrary, however, history has to do with that which is a split with the past. History's "object" is that which intervenes in the objective continuity that is fixed in its chain of events. Historical reality is, more than anything else, event.

As Paul Thevenaz writes, the event is "the power of eruption" proper to "the catastrophe that descends upon us, to the war that breaks out, to the decisive encounter or the internal conversion."¹ The event foils all calculations; it changes the "aspect of things" and the "course of history": the slaves' revolt, the discovery of new lands, an invention in all its novelty, the boldness of prophets and reformers, the genius in the flush of his creation. It is nonsense and can become outrage, but it also forces us to seek a

1. "Événement et historicité," *L'Homme et l'histoire, Actes du VI^e Congrès des Sociétés de Philosophie de Langue Française* (Paris, 1952), p. 219.

new meaning, to revise our scale of values. If one did away with this shock and this innovation, what would remain of history? The “natural” course of the world, the stagnation of routine, the comfort of a settled state of torpor, but definitely no “innovation,” no institution, no progress.

Innovation jolts the “past” and agitates the present. A political change is deemed subversive, a religious reform seems a sacrilege, a want of understanding stalks the masters of art and philosophy. Freedom must forge its way past the barriers of an established world, acquired situations, intellectual conformities, sacred customs.

When creative liberty governs the event, the notion of the source eclipses the causal explanation. When the event is a Corneille, a Rembrandt, or a Beethoven, history penetrates into the realm of qualities. To accumulate records, to draw up comparative tables, to detect influences and filiations—all this patient “objective” labor would doubtless be adequate for handling the secondary works of those who continue or imitate a trend. In the presence of creations of genius it can, at the very most, show what is not a masterpiece by giving the reader or the audience a better understanding of where the literary or aesthetic “creation” springs from. Rotrou is as “interesting” as Racine, Auguste Barbier as “important” as Victor Hugo, in regard to “objective” method and causal exposition. For genius to assume its full significance in relation to history, the essential solitude by which genius reveals itself must be safeguarded in one way or another.

Virgil is not the “cause” of Dante, nor is Victor Hugo the “consequence” of Shakespeare. A work of genius is a unique event, without precedent and incomparable to other works. Along with genius something exceptional and new enters the world, as if by a leap or a surge. Originality and not derivation, it is not a condition, but it creates instantaneously. Nothing is more disappointing than the biographies of great artists or illustrious writers for those who seek in them a kind of “genial nature” that nurtures all action. Narrowness and flaws mar the grandeur that one would wish to find ever present. Genius evidences itself intermittently, like a grace bestowed as a precarious right.

Genius and the masterpiece are certainly “in history.” But just as certainly they are constituents of history, before history, at the origin of history. Through them history advances and makes itself known. The masterpiece achieved in the present is created for the future, revealing a truth that had been hidden until then—a point of departure for subsequent developments. Dramatic art is no longer the same after Molière; Cézanne

and Van Gogh opened up fresh dimensions to painting. Bach is not a Vivaldi, a Marc Antoine Charpentier, a Buxtehude, or a combination of these three "influences." Something begins with him: an intensity, a joyfulness, a kind of fresh dimension is proffered to the world.²

Great statesmen, inventors, explorers, to the extent that they open up new vistas, triumph over the interplay of deductions and causes that levels all originality. The founders of religion shake the weight of customs and doctrines. Decisions, undertakings, and institutions are historical only to the extent that they terminate the past and embark upon the future: a spirit of adventure is always present in the most succinct calculations. "Historical revivals" are conceived only when they return to prior problems or efforts in an actual and living relationship with the world. Napoleon repeats Caesar but in the atmosphere of his times.

For the notion of a continuous thread that unravels from prehistoric times to our day one must substitute the idea of a discontinuous thread, knots of events, some empty, some full, noteworthy dates and insignificant periods. Certain "events" are central, lighting up entire areas of history—Greek philosophy, the advent of Christ for Christianity, the "enlightenment" in the eighteenth century, the industrial revolution in England. A global point of view, in regrouping isolated and homogeneous "facts," enables one to acquire a more precise interpretation of each one of them: German unity in the nineteenth century is a movement of the whole, a totality which carries with it many particular facts and gives them meaning.

THE UNDERSIDE OF HISTORY

The reader might be tempted to conclude from the preceding pages that history has a penchant for noise and agitation, for spectacular enterprises, resounding speeches, open revolts, and scandals. But this hubbub cannot make us forget the "historical silences": the heavy silence of oppressed peoples, devotion concealed, quiet loyalty; the daily tasks that form the background canvas of "great history." Greatness is enveloped in silence, but so is crime or betrayal. Poison or the sword of treason are made ready in the shadows, and defection, in keeping silent, awaits its hour.

Silence grows heavy during the "historic" hours when the destiny of a people is decided. Parliamentary assemblies are filled with silence when grave circumstances bring the head of the government to the platform to

2. On the subject of aesthetic creation see Gaëtan Picon, "L'Esthétique et l'histoire," *Diogenes*, No. 4, pp. 31–51.

confront each man with his "historic" responsibilities: war or peace. This silence is history passing.

The historian is in a good position to know that silence, as much as noise or speech, is the raw material of history. It allows him to enter where the plot is being hatched, into the private assemblies where the sovereign makes his decisions, to witness the slow maturation of crises and revolutions. He sees through the vanity and insignificance of the farce played by false great men posturing before history. There are texts that must be "read between the lines," mute witnesses that must be interrogated, hidden grandeurs that must be acknowledged. One has to detect the truth beneath the mask and even on the mask, make silence speak without betraying it. A conspiracy is concocted between the historian's probity and history's "secrets," which allows a suppressed word, an authentic admission, to escape.

For history is, in essence, the word. Nature itself is silence where there is harmony and song. To become history is to speak out and give meaning to this eternal silence. Narration is the mode of communication proper to history. The event already has a meaning in itself; even when it surprises or eludes, it poses a question that demands an answer. In the presence of occurrences history is a "listening post" that waits for the being, for events to reveal something of the world.

It is the historian, because he himself is life and "subject," who alone can understand the secret meaning of the historical reality through his encounter with other lives. Beneath appearances and words which frequently mask the truth, he penetrates to the hidden springs and deeper motives. He is especially called upon to attribute a large share of the motives that guide men to the all-powerful impulses which have given rise to the "myths."

These myths are not just error or fantasies. They stem from living experiences or from collective patterns of action. They translate into symbols a certain concrete relationship with the world. They carry with them the heart's profound attachment and are mingled with judgments, "truths" which we profess to such an extent that we declare false whatever contradicts our myth and true whatever confirms it. Nation, class, system of government, cannot be inclosed in geographical, economic, or juridical definitions. The nation rests on national sentiment. Class-consciousness adheres to its own concept and nourishes it. No political regime is capable of subsisting without monarchical or republican loyalty, without a minimum of civic spirit. These realities are based upon collective sentiments, partici-

pation, rites, symbols which, although not entirely rational, nonetheless have their own coherence and "logic."

Historical "movements" interpret movements of the soul, communicable emotions, enthusiasms, or fanaticisms. How can one "understand" the revolutionary days, the impetus toward nationalism, the "revolt of the masses," without participating in the affective conditions and in the myths that gave them their strength and their pungency? To do so is not to indulge in pathos but to acknowledge the real in all the vibrations of being. Objective and subjective are not contradictory but complementary. An objective subjectivity, a receptivity that allows the object to appear just as it is, an understanding that is already, to a certain extent, by itself permeated with affectivity and will—only these attributes adapt themselves to that moving and complex "object" which constitutes historical reality. Better than a so-called impartiality, this total comprehension, capable of accepting the irrational and of respecting surprise, is necessary to the historian. To judge other peoples, he will be wary of prejudices and aversions that stem from his own national loyalty, but his own allegiance will make the foreigner's attachment to his land more understandable, even though he might be an enemy. A Catholic historian studying the Reformation will find it difficult to avoid a certain almost instinctive distrust of Protestant "heresy"; a Protestant will find it hard to overcome resentment of "intolerance" and "deviations." An atheist will readily yield to the illusion that his own "position" will immediately insure his impartial judgment, forgetting perhaps too readily that his "neutrality" at one stroke closes to him the mental universe of Catholics and Protestants.

There are very different ways of "orienting" history, even with the best of will. It can be written, as was done in earlier days, from a strictly national point of view: "History of France," "History of England," "History of Russia," and so on. But our epoch witnesses the appearance of "histories" that are envisaged within a European or even a universal framework. From the viewpoint of a history of France, Charlemagne's empire is a kind of monster whose dismemberment represents the birth of France; from the standpoint of a history of Europe, this dismemberment comprised the political formation of the Continent and led to ten centuries of "provincial" antagonisms. There exists, therefore, a secret spring that animates the historian's purpose and governs all emphasis.

Inquiries and publications are the consequence of a decision and represent "viewpoints," a selection in which the personality of the historian intervenes. Among great historians like Renan, Taine, and Michelet, Gabriel

Monod showed how personality determined the design and the shadings of history.³ Because of his intellectual honesty, it was toward critical history that Renan directed his attention; Michelet, the great visionary, found the perfect expression of his sensitivity in the tableaux of history as resurrection; Taine wanted to elevate history to the rank of a science, a rigorous exposition based upon laws. Confronted by such different "histories," who, then, would dare to deny their validity, once their point of view has been accepted? Truth does not emanate from "the nature of things"; it requires a decree of the mind, a decision about life that runs a risk in order to partake of the truth.

Such an attitude is doubtless a departure from the concept of history that was in favor during the end of the last century at the very moment when, for example, Langlois and Seignebos defined the general rules of historical discipline: "History is written with documents."⁴ The document from which methodical inquiry extracts the fact is master of the truth, a kind of pre-existing truth, that is concealed within the texts. We know today that the very notion of science in modern times reposes on a conception of truth that emanates from the fundamental orientation of thought since Descartes. The consequence of "subjectivity," which is the basis of our contemporary behavior, seeking from truth purely internal criteria on man as subject, acknowledges as true only that which we can project before us as images, as "objects." We reduce the entire world to a universal panorama, to what Heidegger calls a "*Weltbild*."⁵ When we manipulate "facts" like bits of "truth" and resort to documents as to a supreme judge of the true and the false, we act as though truth came to us from the outside, from objects. We forget that, according to modern thought which considers man the source and the master of truth, it is ourselves, in the last analysis, who decide the truth, having dismissed all authority with the same sovereign liberty which, through its knowledge and technique, nurtures the giant works of the universe.

THREATS TO HISTORY

In the long course of its labor of inquiry, criticism, and exposition, history is a "ghost hunt." The historical represses the legendary and the imaginary and only preserves the real. "To re-establish facts" in the face of fiction, to resist the persistent seduction of the fantastic and the miraculous, but also

3. *Les Maîtres de l'histoire: Renan, Taine, Michelet* (Paris, 1895).

4. *Introduction aux études historiques* (Paris: Hachette, 1897).

5. Cf. *Holzwege* (Frankfort, 1950), study entitled "Das Weltbild."

to pluck from legends and tales the element of historical truth that is hidden in them—all this represents an incessant struggle. The anxiety to wage it has been bequeathed to us by the positivist discipline. No one can challenge this critical attitude. But there are muffled threats more difficult to exorcise either because they stem from the exigencies of the strictest logic or because they are confused with the evolution of history itself in modern times.

Determinism is both history's ally and its enemy. History would have no foundation in a world devoid of natural laws. In the absence of determinism, chance would decree man's fate, subjected as he is to anarchical forces. But if it is an absolute, determinism crushes freedom and, therefore, all history. Confronted with a continuous chain of cause and effect, historical science would be but a simple affirmation.

History is history solely because of its freedom. A history of slavery has meaning only if the conditions of servility run counter to a capacity for freedom. A history of techniques reveals that man is intent upon liberating his freedom from natural necessities. Freedom, it is true, causes an outcry in the world of reason. It is bitterly contested and can always be contested: it cannot be subtracted from nothing. "As an objectively scientific knowledge, it does not exist," writes Karl Jaspers.⁶ It can be seen only as concrete and living; it exists in the mute protests of the oppressed, in resistance to the invader, flight from servitude. Freedom cannot be demonstrated; it manifests itself, or it hides, which is still another way of revealing itself. Beneath the cold eye of the observer what remains of this freedom? Immobility or dream—it is that door to the future through which history enters the world.

But here is a more disturbing and more stubborn specter than determinism: springing from the embers of negativeness, nihilism undermines our epoch with its destructive force. The century is made dizzy by noise and sensations; it takes great pride in its giant cities, its bold constructions, its speedy transportation. But, silently, nihilism is on the prowl, debilitating vital forces, lying in wait for a time of fatigue or boredom, for those rare moments of quiet when modern man is accessible.

Wave follows wave, spring follows winter, insensitive to good or evil: nihilism whispers to man that the world is that nature which knows nothing and has no desires. Called "nonsense," "incredulity," "despair," it is the perfidious "Why?" raised by doubt in the face of the technical progress and comfort of our times. Nihilism undermines all moral strength through

6. *Origine et sens de l'histoire*, trans. H. Naef (Paris, 1954), p. 195.

political cynicism. It says in *Mein Kampf*, “A colossal lie has the power to dissipate doubt.” It is wafted on the air of the century with all the nausea of the “scientific death” camps. And it is this giddy power which the “atomic revolution” intermingles with the vision of tomorrow’s planetary upheavals.

Nietzsche’s philosophy is outside our concern in this essay. But his historical significance is of importance to us to the extent that his bitter and fiery words herald a decisive event in our epoch—the wound that is buried in the heart of modern man and causes him to oscillate between excess and failure, defiance and absurdity.

Nietzsche did not “invent” nihilism. He merely demonstrated it at work in Western metaphysics since Descartes, and he forced it to become aware of itself. One might doubt that Nietzsche would have stopped there. Not only did he free us of facile negations, of vulgar atheism, and insipid immorality, but, further, carried away by his corrosive logic to the point of “devouring his own doctrine,”⁷ it would seem that, in turning his power of negation against nihilism, he neutralized its poison. Negation does not result in negations. An outcry, whether anguish or hope, reverberates throughout the void, like a freedom restored, like a passionate question seeking the being.⁸

Without doubt, Nietzsche’s “nihilism” does not in itself warrant either faith or atheism. It merely opens up a “free area” where man, emancipated from false absolutes and specious doctrines, can ask his fundamental questions. The mind no longer proceeds along the paths of deduction or syllogism but rather in a more direct and simple relationship with the world; life, with its humble tasks, reunited through poetry and creativity, its liberty, and its truth—in short, its historicity. With this vision of the world, history, renewed by astonishment and discovery, freed from the superstition of objectivity and the so-called “laws of history,” can in the end but gain in depth and lucidity. It is no longer a harmless game but a decisive battle; throughout other periods and through other men, history is really a matter that concerns man, his relation to the world, his destiny, his life—the concrete, actual, living man of the past confronted with the same pre-occupations and dangers as our own.

7. M. Dufrenne and P. Ricoeur, *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l'existence*, p. 237.

8. On this problem see the fine article by Heidegger, “Nietzsches Wort Gott ist tot,” in *Holzwege*.

TOWARD A NEW HISTORICAL SPIRIT

During the last century the historian's working conditions have profoundly altered.

A. The purely technical plane does not need to be stressed here, since it has already been analyzed many times.⁹ The contemporary historian is the beneficiary of an imposing and varied production left to him by his predecessors; of an abundant documentation, of working tools on a scale which other periods never knew: libraries, archives, collections of texts, specialized periodicals.

In our times the historian runs the risk of being buried beneath the very abundance of documents of all kinds. The labor of research often defies the limitations of a human life and of an individual effort. The obstacle is the reverse in regard to ancient periods; because of a lack of sufficiently explicit documents, conjectures are often clumsy and hazardous. And in our day, of course, one can appeal to the human sciences: archeology, history of religions, ethnology.

Our epoch, demanding in regard to precision, has inherited a precious legacy from the critical method perfected by prior generations. But the spirit in which the critical apparatus must be applied needs to be more flexible, since historical "science" possesses a broader significance than in earlier days.

B. The field of historical knowledge has, indeed, been broadened and its perspective expanded. It is no longer limited to a political and military study of states. In accordance with the thinking of Karl Marx and the socialist theorists, history introduced problems of a social, economic, and cultural order into its sphere. Rural history, the history of cities, history of techniques, history of art and literature, ideas or concepts of the world—thus our vision of the universe branches out into diverse and complementary images. In the fervor of these discoveries we have come to the point of contrasting the "history of civilization" with the "history of events": a profitable distinction on condition that the diversity of the real is respected, but a harmful one should it become exclusive. The very landscape, the shapes of tiles, of fields and barns, which a Lucien Fèbvre utilizes for historical documentation are "events," realities that evolve in time, and in which a human presence manifests itself, with its concerns and interests.

9. Particularly in H. I. Marrou's book, *De la connaissance historique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1954).

Inversely, even a history of reigns and of battles is inconceivable today without at least a background of the economic, social, and religious circumstances. All history must be placed within its geographical context; it must be “fixed” in its proper place. The forms of geographical space play a part in the fate of the “Greek world” or in the changes in the British Commonwealth. History takes hold of space. Certain places are charged with history, and this historical flavor is blended with the place itself: Athens, Rome, Paris. At Aigues-Mortes, at Pompei and Paestum, one “inhales” the past like a presence, a nostalgic aroma. History teaches us, through its ruins and its ancient sites, that peoples and cultures die but also that the past is part of ourselves; the past bids us to remember our life, to look deeply into it.

The “march of history” has drawn historical reality away from us. For a century and a half technology has opened up an entirely new period through the conditions of life available to the Western world. A civilization that has at its command railroads, electricity, airplanes, instantaneous communication, virtually unlimited sources of energy, not only differs from other eras by virtue of its equipment and its way of life. It is the mental universe itself that has changed, thanks to man’s progress in sovereignty—thanks also on occasion to the dizziness he feels in the face of a power that sweeps him along as often as it obeys him. Comfort is not solely an ensemble of needs and material advantages; it is a “state of mind,” a need that contemporary man imposes upon the community.¹⁰ This need, combined with a Westernization of the earth and with the ubiquity conferred today upon man by rapid transportation, tends to mold his sensitivity and orient his thought to such an extent that the worlds of “another age” seem impenetrable: antiquity, the Middle Ages, and even the century of Louis XIV.

C. The problem of “mental universes” should occupy the foreground of the present-day preoccupations of the history of science. It is precisely this problem that Lucien Fèbvre dealt with successfully in his work, *Problème de l’incroyance au XVI^{ième} siècle*, which appeared in 1942. The many attempts to depict Rabelais as an unbeliever of the same ilk as Voltaire and Renan is an anachronism. The allusion to atheistic rationalism was made blindly, at a time when the sixteenth century was still imbued with a mentality steeped in magic, in occult practices, and in vague philosophies in which Catholic survivals were obscurely intermingled with “Lutheran”

10. Cf. A. C. Pigou, “Some Aspects of the Welfare State,” *Diogenes*, No. 7, pp. 1–11.

inspirations." Rabelais moves in a universe where belief and disbelief co-exist and intersect, where our rational impossibilities do not as yet obtain, rationality being still three-quarters mythology. In order to apprehend the mental universe of Rabelais, one must rid one's self of the nineteenth century's way of thinking and go back over the sinuous paths, still semimedieval, which the sixteenth century treads in order to uncover its "truth."

In another category of ideas, the domain of art, one cannot immediately assess Greek statuary, Byzantine mosaics, Dutch painters, "fauvism" with identical norms or the same sensitivity. There are sensitivities which are mutually exclusive—irreducible worlds, not games or diversions. A major obstacle to historical knowledge, the boundary of mental universes is also the decisive threshold leading to an authentic understanding of other times and other peoples, of other modes and other ideas.

We can never separate ourselves completely from our mental horizon. History merely opens up vistas into other universes. Even so eminent a thinker as Hegel lived and reflected within the framework of the "truth" which Western metaphysics proffered. He did not doubt the universal validity of this viewpoint. It required the philosophical invectives of a Kierkegaard or a Nietzsche, the rebellion of events against history, the lesson taught us by the human sciences, to reveal to us that the West was "a history" itself, a historical moment and place—that modes of thought, sensitivity, and even reason were changing. History, in turn, is a "moment" of history, a belated and perhaps fragile awareness in the mental universe inherited from Greece, from Judeo-Christian tradition, and from the Renaissance. Entire civilizations, like those of India or China, have ignored this concern. For a long time a mentality imbued with myths excluded the quasi-totality of the earth from its vision. Can one be certain that the historical perspective will prevail in the end?

D. The contemporary world is a problematical one. Intellectual security, moral ease, established truths—everything is once again called into question. Thus, in the midst of uncertainties or self-surrenderings, man's freedom asserts itself; but the fortuitousness of his life asserts itself as well. History should fear most today not a misapplication of determinism but rather the intoxication of a human freedom that comes to naught, or of a fortuitousness in which the individual being is no longer able to attach himself to a meaning, to an order, to a stability—in other words, to a history.

The grandiose idea of a universal history that can be embraced in a

single glance, a history that is objectively impartial and definitive, is daily losing its esteem. But, inversely, history has drawn closer to man and to his life. Its proper mission would seem to be that of protecting the concrete integrity of man from the oversimplifications of the scientific mind; to safeguard the singular, the unique, from the general, the abstract, and the essence. In so doing, it also protects man from the modern temptation of disorder, despair, and excess. It is man's concept of himself; it helps him to exorcise his own myths and to choose his way in the world with clarity and realism.

History is neither a "rose-colored story" nor a course in morality. It does not warrant an optimism that covers up with edifying tales the tragedy of reality where failure, misfortune, crime, treachery, and mediocrity are to be found. But, in contrast to those who would readily darken with their pessimism the entire course of events, history protests that it is born from a "Yes" as its response to an appeal from the world. Each morning, plans and hopes spring up to relieve the ennui of the disappointing pasts to make the present arise and face future struggles. People who have lived through the most bitter and bruised period of history still cannot believe that the children who come to take their place will not protect the lost causes better than they have done. Humanity is not a being that time has lined and wrinkled. Each generation offers history a new chance. History attests man's youth: it is youth itself, the ardor for existence, the gift of the being which is renewed at every moment. The present that it experiences is, according to Péguy's expression, "the very brink of the future on the side of the presence." The word that resounds in historical narrations communicates, from age to age, that presence, incessantly renewed, which, during its earthly stay and within its human limitations, breathes, struggles, and waits, its gaze turned toward the future and the light.