Saying Good-bye to Historical Truth

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I am grateful to Professor Roth for defending me against my critics and for making it clear that the reification of historical truth generates more problems than it solves. In taking this position, I am in essential agreement with his assertion that since "past events exist, qua events, only in terms of some historically situated conception of them" (p. 185), "there is no warrant for maintaining that there is some static past" which might be uncovered by diligent research (pp. 186-7). I would like to expand on the reasons why this is so, and then—since narrative truth is all we have—go on to discuss the more significant characteristics of this particular genre.

What, first of all, is the past? "Central to our feelings of awareness," writes Penrose (1989),

is the sensation of the progression of time. We seem to be moving ever forward, from a definite past into an uncertain future. The past is over, we feel, and there is nothing to be done with it. It is unchangeable, and in a certain sense, it is "out there" still. . . . What has happened has happened, and there is now nothing whatever that we, nor anyone else, can do about it. (p. 302)

But is the past as definite and as much "out there" as we like to think? Even though the past is past, it is no more reachable than the future; if the future is uncertain, so is the past, although for different reasons. And even though it has already happened, we are at liberty to recover any number of versions of it, just as we can tell any number of stories about the future. Listen to St. Augustine:

It is now plain and clear that neither past nor future are existent, and that it is not properly stated that there are three times, past, present, and future. But perhaps it might properly be said that there are three present times: the present of things past, the present of things present, and the present of things future. These three are in the soul, but elsewhere I do not see them: the present of things past is in memory; the present of
things present is in intuition; the present of things future is in expecta-
tion. (Confessions 11.20.26, cited in Gifford 1990, 80)

Once we put aside our intuitive feelings about the arrow of time,
we begin to discover any number of symmetries between past and
future and in the process, learn the significance of a fundamental
discovery. It is symmetry over time that marks, according to Penrose
(1989),

all the successful equations of physics. They can be used equally well
in one direction in time as in the other. The future and the past seem phys-
ically to be on a completely equal footing. Newton’s laws, Hamilton’s
equations, Maxwell’s equations, Einstein’s general relativity . . . —all
remain effectively unaltered if we reverse the direction of time. (p. 302)

If we can learn to disregard our intuitive feeling that the past is
somehow stored—in archives or in memories—and begin to realize,
instead, that it exists in a way that can never be captured, we begin to
sense its resemblance to the future. Once we take this step, we must
give up Freud’s archeological metaphor and realize that finding his-
torical truth is just as impossible as seeing into the future.

Consider Professor Roth’s observation (p. 185) that there is no
historical record per se. The record of the past would seem to be an
uneven mixture of signal, noise, and silence, but we have no way of
separating one ingredient from another. We also know that the record
is rarely laid down with any correlation to man-made time. Our
principal method for ordering observations in the present is, there-
fore, conspicuously absent; thus it might be said that making sense of
the recorded past is something like trying to navigate the globe before
the invention of the chronometer.

Further confusion is added by the fact that the record cannot speak
for itself. Red shifts in astronomy, pot fragments in archeology, and
fossils in geology all bear witness, but only man has a narrative gift.
Even though Freud was fond of saying saxis loquuntur, the stones only
speak in a metaphorical sense. Only man can make up the story
because the past—like the future—has no voice.

Third, we need to remind ourselves of the obvious truth that
because the record cannot speak, it is in no position to contradict the
wrong stories people tell about it. Any number of theories can be set
loose on the world, sustained only by an odd fact here and a coinci-
dence there and reinforced by repetition and other rhetorical devices.
But since the past has no voice, it will never raise even the smallest
objection.
It is probably no accident that the three sciences just listed—astronomy, archeology, and geology—are all nonexperimental disciplines. Because of this circumstance, they are necessarily at the mercy of the past and have no choice but to extract all possible meanings from the record. The narrative rules for the nonexperimental sciences are necessarily different from what they are for their experimental sisters. The latter write narratives that, because they are the outcome of experiments, depend on a stricter set of criteria. Doubtful stories can always be checked by replication; if the same story emerges a second time around, we feel inclined to support the hypothesis. But it is difficult to see how replication can apply to stories based on the historical record. If two observers were independently given the same set of observations, we would hardly expect them to write identical stories; and if differences emerge, as they surely must, how do we go about establishing similarities? Perfect duplication raises another problem. If two stories about the past are essentially the same, would that constitute replication or plagiarism? It is clear that a different set of rules apply to nonexperimental narratives.

If reading the past has something in common with foretelling the future, it is no surprise that many narrative truths will necessarily flourish. Deprived of a single historical truth, we must turn our attention to devising rigorous rules for writing narratives which accurately represent the record. Once we give up the search for historical truth, we must focus on the different ways in which a narrative can be persuasive, convincing—and sometimes, just plain wrong.

We can now begin to see why Freud was so attracted to the archeological metaphor, and we can isolate both a historical and an epistemological reason. History plays a part because through a sheer accident of circumstance, he was forming his theory at just the time when archeology was entering its golden age:

Schliemann was unearthing his many-layered Troy at Hissarlik during Freud’s school and university years; Evans was exploring and then excavating Knossos during the period of Freud’s self-analysis and of his collaborative friendships with Breuer and Fliess; Freud was writing The Ego and the Id in the year Carnarvon and Carter discovered the tomb of Tutankhamen, and The Future of an Illusion and Civilization and its Discontents during Woolley’s excavations of Sumerian Ur. (Bowie 1987, 18)

But the metaphor also had an important theoretical implication. If some parts of the past were preserved with as much fidelity as King
Tut's tomb, then we could assume that time does indeed stand still; if some records were this faithful, then it was not unthinkable that similar transcriptions might be found in memory. The metaphor of the past as another country, distant but encounterable, stems directly from this particular archeological tradition and undoubtedly colored Freud's faith in the possibility of reconstruction. If the past is real, then we can search for historical truth and uncover the real source of our patients' unhappiness. But when archeology is seen in a somewhat more realistic light, we replace King Tut's tomb by the partial detail and the ambiguous fragment, and when seen in this context, the past becomes more of a black hole than another country. Under these conditions, historical truth disappears and we are left with the job of making sense out of fragments.

CRITERIA FOR NARRATIVE TRUTH

How do we capture the randomly represented past? The simple attempt to keep a diary should convince anyone that only a small bit of what happened will ever find its way onto the printed page. Assume, for the sake of argument, that there is virtually no delay between the doing and the describing; we quickly realize that the very act of putting things into words is quickly outdistanced by the ever changing present. Inside of a few minutes or hours, we are hopelessly behind. As we set forth our initial sentences, time has moved forward to include many things besides just these sentences; as these other things are put into words, time moves forward again and the ratio of what is saved to what is lost diminishes almost exponentially.

What is more, in the transition from being to language, different rules take over. The practitioners of classical rhetoric were well aware of the ways in which persuasion is fed by repetition, minute and cumulative detail, well-turned phrases, and a cluster of other rhetorical devices. So it is with memory. The so-called flashbulb memory (see Neisser 1982), in which a scene is brought back in picture-perfect detail, is now seen as not necessarily a true trace of the past; we are fooled by the dense description into thinking that such and such really happened. In similar fashion, there is much clinical evidence to show that repeated memories are not necessarily any truer than something remembered for the first time, many years later; we are fooled by the
rhetoric of repetition into believing that we have opened a window on the past. We are also influenced by mere fluency. The ability to talk or write easily and at length about a particular time and place almost necessarily gives the impression that something real is being described. Articulate use of language (e.g., the rhetorical figure of enargia') is one of our criteria for mimesis, and if detail is combined with a skillful sense of phrasing and emphasis, we feel we are in the hands of a truthful storyteller and almost immediately suspend disbelief. But we have not necessarily recovered the past; we may have only fallen hostage to the rhetorical voice.

Each of these rhetorical devices fools us into thinking that we have recovered the past. But not only should we be suspicious of mere rhetoric; evidence from a number of sources (see, e.g., Hirshberg 1989) suggests that the copy theory of memory cannot apply to humans because "remembering is a productive rather than reproductive activity" (Hirshberg 1989, 372). One reason that the copy theory of memory does not hold is that

our capacity to understand our personal past, to remember something, depends on our own embeddedness in a present situation or purposive context which provides the key or grid on the basis of which any past experience is initially approached and eventually understood. (Hirshberg 1989, 364)

Not only is the record incomplete, as we have seen, with signal undifferentiated from noise, but whatever fragments we manage to identify will necessarily draw their meaning from the context of observation. And this context is continuously changing. Under some conditions, it may be so unrelated to the context of experience (the state of mind in which the original event was first represented) that the past is almost unintelligible; under other conditions, the context of observation may resonate with the context of experience and enable us to understand more than we experienced during the initial happening. If the unobtainable mimetic copy is pictured as a reproductive norm, the picture of the past produced by productive memory probably oscillates around this norm, at times more impoverished, at other times far superior. The paradox is that we can never tell—from the context of observation—which state we are in.
Language is the key. While it may not recover the entire past, a fortunate choice of words can enable the patient to make discoveries about himself and his life which he had never seen before. Once caught by the right phrase, significant parts of his past world will be sensed in a new light and, once captured in language, many never disappear: Language extends the senses in psychoanalysis just as it does in science and in literature. Interpretation, when embellished by a telling metaphor or other figure of speech, creates a new worldview for the patient, much as a scientific theory allows us to see farther into space or matter and a poem enables us to see the world in an altogether novel manner. Loewald (1960) is very clear on this point. “Language,” he writes,

in its most specific function in analysis, as interpretation, is thus a creative act similar to that in poetry, where language is found for phenomena, contexts, connections, experiences not previously known and speakable. New phenomena and new experience are made available as a result of reorganization of material according to hitherto unknown principles, contexts and connections. (p. 26)

For an example of the way in which literary skill on the part of the analyst makes a significant difference in isolating an issue for further analysis, consider the following observation by Havens (1989) about one of his patients:

Early the subject of merciless bullying, he had learned to hide himself through an elusive presence. I came to suspect that in his family the bullying took a subtler but still more overwhelming form: his mother’s enormous and unopposed self-centeredness made every other family member a fawning servant. There was no space for separate demands of independent personalities. One could say that the patient had been strangled in the cradle if he had not been so carefully bathed and fed. (p. 6)

This particular literary skill stands out because only by choosing words with the care of an artist can Havens go beyond what is given by the patient and carry him back to something that probably happened but was never put into words. We see, in this instance, an example of how the past is created and captured by language in the service of enlarging the patient’s sense of himself. This particular piece of narrative truth would seem to embellish the past as it really is—wies eigenlich gewesen. We have provided a piece of what St. Augustine called the present of things past. Language supplies the past with what is so poignantly missing: its narrative voice. But it is the voice
of the present, grafted onto pieces of the historical record—it is always narrative truth.

If historical truth is nothing more than a delusion, we have no choice but to learn to immunize ourselves against the copy model of memory and become continuously suspicious of mimesis as a way of capturing the past. We should be skeptical of any rhetorical figure—energia in particular—that plays on our belief that we have a true copy of what once was. If there is no historical truth, we cannot take refuge in the "tally argument"; more sophisticated criteria for separating truth from fiction need to be developed. But the danger of error does not disqualify all language-based constructions; that the past does not exist intact does not mean that we should give up any claim to it. We begin to see that narrative truth has the potential for enhancing the historical record. We exchange mimesis for creative enrichment and in the process, see more of what once happened than we could ever experience at the moment. Here lies the essential paradox of narrative truth: By giving way to a fictive voice, we can sometimes see the past in a truer light than we experienced at the moment it happened. But because it can never be recaptured in its entirety, we can never know when narrative truth can be believed.

NOTES

1. Enargia is defined as a particularly vivid and pictorial rendering of a scene to bring it before the eyes.
2. In his article (this issue), Roth makes reference to it (see also Grunbaum 1984).
3. Hirshberg (1989) proposes accuracy, coherence, and productive outcome as the earmarks of a successful reconstruction (p. 364).

REFERENCES


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