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**Paul Ricoeur**

## **Humanities between Science and Art**

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## Humanities between Science and Art

By Paul Ricoeur

In my paper I take "Humanities" as the bundle of disciplines of which the human sciences – the Geisteswissenschaften – constitute the hard kernel. And I take history, or rather historiography, as the paradigmatic case of a human science, which extends between the two poles of science and art. At one end we have the procedures linked to the treatment of archives, at the other end we have the range of verbal expressions which make history a segment of literature. In between you have the dichotomy between explanation and comprehension, namely the range of devices thanks to which historians attempt to give answers to such questions as "Why did this event occur, why did these people do these or those things?" These explanation devices deal in different ways with the clause *because* as the linguistic trait common to all our answers to the question *why?*; and we know how heterogeneous the uses of the clause *because* may be. The conjunction of explanation and comprehension midway between the documentary pole and the literary pole is itself a good example of the mixture of science and art all along the historical process.

Before proceeding analytically by treating in turn three distinct phases – the documentary, the explanatory/comprehensive, and the literary ones – let me say a few words about the dynamic unity which holds together the three phases. First, the whole process occurs in the plane of writing. Archives, at one hand, are written, and

books, at the opposite end, are written. This is why we may call the whole process historiography; history writing. It would be a mistake to assign the category of writing to the literary phase alone. From beginning to end, the historiographical process moves in the element of writing. This is the main difference between history and memory. Memory unfolds its stages within the oral discourse, even if declarative memory through story telling is ready for being written. But precisely this last stage of memory is the first stage of history; then memories have assumed the shape of a documentary piece in an archive. For that reason it would be appropriate to apply to this transition, rather to this leap, from orality to scripturality, if I may say so, the kind of perplexity that Plato induces in the dialogue *Phaedrus* concerning the invention of writing, or better, the gift of writing. Is not writing a threat for memory?<sup>1</sup> Is this *pharmacon*, this drug offered by the god to the king, a poison or remedy? The question is paradoxical to the extent that Plato himself kept writing.

So the question is planted as a thorn at the heart of all human practices shaped by the use of writing. It will accompany us from the beginning to the end of our inquiry. Does writing work as a poison or as remedy as regards the weaknesses of memory? Who knows? Which weaknesses? Which weaknesses of memory as pre-writing? Two of them deserve to be pointed at, because both of them will accompany our travel through historiography. The first one concerns the phenomenological status of memories. A memory is a kind of mental image which claims to provide a subsidiary presence to an absent thing, more precisely to events which are no longer there, absent in that sense, but which were present to contemporaries when they occurred. Presence of absence, absence of a previous presence – such is the main paradox of memory as representation of past events.

The Greek had a first word for this paradoxical phenomenon, the word *eikon* that we may translate by image, effigy, or representation. And they had another word, *mimesis*, to say the relationship between the present image and the absent thing, the past event. This paradox – presence of absence, absence of a previous presence –

works as an aporia at the heart of the phenomenology of memory. And it is transferred as such from memory to history. At its first stage, the documentary one, history relies on the *traces* left behind by the memory of past events; and the problematic of the *trace* repeat that of the *eikon* as *mimesis*. This paradox too will accompany our whole travel, to the extent that it is at the last stage of the historical process, at the literary stage, that historical writing assumes the function of representing the past. We speak of a historical text as a true representation of the events whose traces had been stored in our archives and which had been questioned in terms of *why?* and *because*. The ultimate test is the corroboration of this basic claim of any historical piece of literature, by opposition to fictional literature, the claim to tell the truth about past events. But the heritage of memory at the level of history is still heavier. Memories are not only images occurring suddenly within our minds with the truth claim which we said as regards past events, - they are images which are target of a search, the search which we call recollection. And recollection is a kind of action, even of practice, sometimes of art, the famous art of memory about which Frances Yates wrote her famous book *The Art of Memory*.<sup>2</sup> This search has its own rules that Aristotle was the first to explore in his essay *Memoria et Reminiscentia*,<sup>3</sup> *reminiscentia* being the Latin word for recollection. Recollection has not only its own rules, but also difficulties and failures of its own. It may be prevented by resistances, as we learned with Freud, it may be manipulated, as we learn by the sociology of knowledge and especially of ideology, and it may be ordered, as it occurs within the framework of ritual commemoration. These recollections have to do with the loss of objects of love (or hatred); the work of memory is also a work of mourning. These burdens too have to be taken into account by history. The threat of haunting ghosts, the tendency to repeat instead of remembering, the threat of ideology, and also the burden of preserving the traces against this wearing away of memory that we call oblivion, forgetfulness.

Such are the two kinds of heritage transferred from memory to history, the true representation of the absent past, the honest recollection of the traces left behind by the testimonies related to past events and preserved in our archives.

In summary the task of history is itself inherited from memory, the twofold task of providing a true representation of past events, that of building its construction as recollective reconstruction of the past. The question remains: does the fulfilment of this task provide a remedy to the weaknesses and diseases pertaining to the *iconic* status of memory and to the search process of active recollection?

### 1. *The documentary stage*

It is as a scientific method that history starts its job. We called *documentary* this initial stage of historical inquiry. What is a *document*, and to what extent are we allowed to speak of documentary evidence?

Let us start from the concept of *trace* that we introduced earlier in relation with the Greek notion of *eikon* and *mimesis*. An *eikon*, we said, is the present image of an absent thing, of a past event which is no longer present but which was present, which *had been*. Trace is the remain of such a present. These remains are immensely various and heterogeneous, from pottery, tools, metals, stones to written documents. It's mainly with written documents the historians have to do, archaeologists dealing with the other kinds of remains. Those that Carlo Ginzburg call *indices*, *index*, indicating marks.

Now these written documents are mainly written *testimonies* left by contemporaries. And it's to these written testimonies that the scientific procedures linked to the critique of testimonies are connected since the time of Lorenzo Valla, the author of the *Donation of Constantine* in XV century<sup>4</sup> and with a more and more critical

eye, also Mabillon, Richard Simon, Bayle and also Spinoza with his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.<sup>5</sup> Let us stay a while with the notion of testimony and critique of testimony. What is a testimony? It's mainly the declaration of a witness who says three things. 1) *I was there* 2) *believe me or not* 3) *if you don't believe my word ask somebody else*.

*I was there*. This claim is that of transmitted memory. It's a word said publicly to somebody else who receives the testimony and in some cases, those that interest us, writes it down. The testimony, we say, is *deposited*. But before that the witness has linked within me and the same statement an account, a narrative, and an act of self-designation thanks to which he or she ascertains his or her testimony, what we call *to attest*. The discursive act of testifying links together is an objective account and a subjective involvement.

Such is the first component: *I was there*. Then, the second one: the other directed dimension of the testimony; somebody else is asked to believe my own word; this relationship of confidence is the presupposition of all kinds of contracts, pacts, treaties etc. On it relies the whole structure of the linguistic community to which I belong. On the extent that the witness is ready to renew and confirm his or her testimony, testimony may be held as a basic institution. But testimony adds its own weaknesses to those of memory; for professional historians every testimony may be held as unreliable as long as it has not been confirmed. By what? By some other testimony. I mean the testimony of other people. We have nothing better than a confrontation between competing testimonies. The outcome of this critical process is what has been called documentary evidence. It has its own limits. First, documents remain mute as long as they have not been questioned. And questions are themselves dependent on subjective interests and intellectual affinity with some specific events, protagonists, institutions, or social and political trends; furthermore, some new documents may always be discovered; as the logical status of evidence, it relies more on falsification than on verification. Finally, it concerns propositions related to

relatively discrete facts, implying proper names, scattered dates, places, verbs of action, or description statements concerning circumstances, etc. Nevertheless the claim that there are no such reliable historical statements is merely contrary to the experience and the practice of professional historians, who agree about limited strings of facts, that we call historical facts. They constitute the scientific component of the truth-claim raised by historical knowledge. To that extent history may claim to be more remedy than poison to collective memory. The reliability of documentary evidence is enough to defeat the negationist stance which denies the patient and unlimited commitment of the historian at work at the archives.

## 2. *The explanatory stage*

Enough for the documentary stage of historiography. Through the question already implied at the documentary stage we are led to the explanatory stage of historiography. A question usually concerns a hypothesis bearing on a contention of historical facts. All questions are not about causes and reasons, but these questions constitute the kernel of historical inquiry. In that regard analytic philosophers of history are right to take into account the whole range of uses of the clause *because*, ranging from causality down to reasons for acting, motivation, and emotional facts. In this way we should no longer oppose explanation and understanding or comprehension.

Henrik von Wright is right when he proposes for historical explanatory devices a mixed model connecting what he calls causal segments and teleological segments. In fact professional historians are not interested in these canonical distinctions which are not adjusted to historical practice. Philosophers, including logically oriented philosophers, should derive their explanatory/comprehensive categories from the actual way of dealing of professional historians. For them the important question concerns

the connection between economical, social, political, cultural factors, the temporal architecture of long or short duration, the play between macro-and micro-development – you don't see the same things from above as from below, social constraints are easier to detect at the macro-level; strategies of negotiation where people fight with uncertainty are easier to decode at the micro-level. In the same way the relationship between structures, conjunctures and events provide the epistemological look with specific problems which are connected with the layer-structure of historical time for which we have no ready-made logical procedures. We have to look at the historian's practice, its way of raising questions and solving problems. History has its own intellectual procedures which have been learned on the spot. Among the numerous problems raised by such contemporary historians as the French member of the Annales school with and after F. Braudel I should like to isolate one specific problem which concerns more directly our inquiry about the relationship between science and art in historiography. It is the problem of mentalities and more broadly of representation as a rather new "object" for professional historians. Representation constitutes the mental component of a social action, the symbolic mediation of every social transaction. Historians have to be interested into the connection between representations and actions, to the extent that history itself is a kind of representation of the ways in which the social bond itself gets construed, including the identities proceeding from this linkage.

Representations in that way belong both to the most refined objects of history and to the historical process itself. It's the place where science and art join their resources. Representations are social facts and mental processes that may be approached from without as objective phenomena and from within as subjective devices with which we share empathic feelings. This is why the history of representation is so problematic, but also so interesting to scrutinise. The unstable position of historiography midway between science and art is quite perfectly reflected in the

dealing of such good historians as Georges Duby writing about "the time of the cathedrals" or "monks, warriors and women".<sup>6</sup>

With the history of representations, history takes hold of itself as part of the representation component of the historical reality itself.

We are led in this way from the explanatory/ comprehensive phase of historiography to the literary phase.

### 3. *The literary phase*

The third part of my paper will be devoted to this literary phase which brings history closer to art.

Two main problems may be raised. The first concerns the means, the procedures, which contribute to the literary structure of the historical work. The second concerns the end, the finality, of these operations. It's with the second problem that all difficulties linked to the notion of representation come to the forefront.

Concerning the means, the strategies, the operation, the procedures, the first thing to say is that the literary representation cannot be reduced to a mere verbal garment added or superimposed to a discourse, the coherence of which would be completed before this stage; the verbal strategies that we will describe bring with themselves an intelligibility of their own which will play its role in the whole process of giving an account, a faithful account of the past. The specific resources of the representation stage is numerous and complex. We have first of all the narrative form of the historical discourse. In *Time and Narrative*<sup>7</sup> I took the narrative as the basic structure of history writing and supported the claim of the so-called narrativist interpretation of the historical understanding. Today I am more cautious and suggest to reserve the discussion of the role of narrative to the third stage of the historiographical opera-

tion. Why? Because, if you hold history-writing as a species of the genre storytelling, then you run the risk of dealing with the narrative as an alternative mode of understanding at the level of explanation. To my mind the pair ‘explanation – understanding’ or ‘comprehension’ has to be dealt with as a distinct topic within the framework of the relation between the question *why?* and the answer *because*. Telling is not a substitute for explanation. Nevertheless, the narrative form brings with itself all the resources of intelligibility linked to the act of emplotting, emplotment. But not everything is a plot in history writing; the conjunction between structure, conjuncture, event raise a problem of an explanatory kind, not merely of a narrative kind. You are right to speak of plot and emplotment when the concrete interaction between the protagonist of social action comes to the forefront. It’s this dramatic – sometimes tragic – dimension of human action which gives an opportunity for a narrative representation of past events. In this regard a typology of the situation able to generate conflicts, confrontations, but also deals of all kinds, promises, treaties, exchanges provide matter for telling. For the *Annales School* it’s the event-layer of the whole historical process which is offered to narrative description, to narrative account, to story telling. To support with some reservation the claim of the narrativist school we can say the structure have to become conjuncture and conjuncture to become event in order that history may be written. Then something happens - events happen. Real people do real things. There is something to tell.

But telling is not the only device pertaining to the literary phase. The rhetorical side of narrative should be taken apart from the process of narrating. By rhetoric devices I mean two different things. We owe to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* an useful distinction between the different uses of public discourse: deliberation, judiciation, and demonstration. They correspond to three paradigmatic situations: the public assembly, the tribunal, and the audiences summoned by such situations as games, burials, victories, defeat; then particular discourses assume the form of *laudatio* or *deploratio*, praise or blame or mourning, as funeral discourse. It’s a question whether historical

discourse may get rid from praise, blame, deploration, mourning. Classical historians such as Thukydides praising Pericles, seventeenth century historians praising the King were allowed too to blame tyrannical figures. And today it's impossible to write a history of the holocaust without assuming the stance of blaming, condemning the perpetrators and mourning the victims.

Has praise been disappearing from historical discourse? Praise of greatness according to the diversity of the forms of greatness in democratic societies. What is at stake is the very structure of a discourse aiming at interesting, convincing, and persuading the readers; there is a pact between the historian as writer and the public as a reading public; in this respect, rhetoric is the whole of devices aiming at persuading the reader that the writer is right. But rhetoric cannot be reduced to strategy of conviction; it's also a strategy of persuasion; here come the so-called figures of discourse; the figurative dimension of language Vico analysed and even promoted: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, but also irony; such figurative devices get mixed with the procedures of narration and with the structures of argumentation, contributing in this way to the logic of probability which prevails in the discourse of humanities. We should not forget that probability and persuasion constitute the objective and subjective sides of rhetorics. Convincing and persuading constitute the correlative replica from the part of the receiver, of the reader of the historical work.

A third device has to be added to the two preceding ones: the narrative and the rhetorical – This last one is the most problematic; it concerns the strategy of depiction added to that of conviction and of persuasion; the depiction bring history close to fiction. The depiction of situations, of course of action, of characters, of dramatic events, with the stress laid on accidents, breaks, leaps, discontinuities, brings historical works close to epic, tragedy, and for us modern, to the novel. It's a fact that 19<sup>th</sup> century's historical works were contemporary to the production of the most impressive novels from Balzac to Tolstoj and Dostojevski. The danger then is that of complete fictionalisation of historical discourse. This danger could be anti-

culated, to the extent that history as the heir of memory is also the heir of the main aporias of memory, the aporia of the *eikon*, of the image as the presence, the presentation, the representation of an absent thing which was present when it occurred. The link between presence and absence was already the enigma of the mnemonic image. How an absent thing can be re-presented in an actual image, which claim to be the *image of*. This aporia of memory was still aggravated by the fact that an image of the past is not only found but searched for, and in a sense forged, elaborated, construed, established, such was the problem of recollection – as faithful. These two aporias of memory return at the level of history writing in the following way. The question is whether history provides a more faithful image of past events than memory. Of course its scope is broader, images of the past proposed by history are not private images but public images, supported by documentary evidence and the coherence of explanatory devices; history in that sense looks as a remedy to the weaknesses and diseases of memory. We may speak of history as of learned memory, a critical memory. But that positive assessment should not prevent us from being watchful as concerns the specific deviations generated by the process of history writing. The paradox is that the narrative, the rhetorical, and above all the fictional strategies proper to this stage of historiography tend to overshadow the intentionality of historical knowledge, namely the claim to tell the truth about the past. The concrete analysis devoted to the relationship between representation and narration, representation and rhetoric, representation and fiction, tend to show that these devices do not merely channel the intentional more toward the past, but interfere with this intention and superimpose their own purity, their own resistance to the recognition of the past. For example narrative are not transparent structures, which would let events speak, if we may say so; narratives tend to draw the interest of the reader toward their own play; the narrative structure tends to absorb the referential tread of discourse for sake of its game; stories become a world of their own, increasing the wealth of intertextual relationships; a narrative world is

born which tends to exclude from its sphere any referential claim. Such is the paradox. Narratives do not merely channel the referential claim of historical consciousness but celebrate their story.

This exclusion of the real past from the linguistic realm is still more impressive at the level of the rhetorical devices, praise and blame, metaphores and irony, all these tricks of language contribute to the opacity of the literary representation; the resistance of the tool to it's initial destination reaches its high point with the fictional component of history as a work of art. It's even at this stage that the initial aporia of memory reappears at the other end of the whole process, To the extend that the writing of history is one of the most spectacular features of imagination, the question remains open as to the basic difference between fiction and reality. This perplexity has taken a dramatic turn in the last decades concerning the representation of the shoa, of the holocaust. The problem is not only that of the limits of representation, to use the expression of Saul Friedlander in his excellent book *Probing the Limits of Representation*<sup>8</sup>; the question is not of weakness but of failure and of deception. The so-called revisionist keep playing with this aporia; survivors tell stories, all stories are artefacts; they are fictional narratives; nobody is able to say what really happened; the boundary between fiction and reality is a mere claim which cannot be substantiated.

What can be opposed to the revisionists? To my mind, the reply cannot be found at the level of the literary representation where the gap between fiction and reality is bridged by the very devices of representation, either narrative, rhetorical, or fictional; the solution resides at the two previous stages of the historiographical process, at the level of explanation and beyond it at that of documentary evidence. As long as you stay at the mere level of representation you get in the paradox of the icon of the past, which was already the paradox of the memory-image; you are never sure that an icon is not a phantasm(o), that the mimesis is not an invention. You have to regress from representation to explanation and comprehension, and from explanation to

documentary evidence, and beyond documentary evidence to the testimonies provided in the archive. Then, by chance, you will hear the voice of the witnesses who said *I was there – believe me or not – and if you don't believe me, ask somebody else*. The reliability of witnesses is our ultimate resources. The confidence put in the word of somebody saying *I was there* is our only help. We have nothing better than testimony and the critique of testimony.

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Phaidrus*. Electronic editions (greek and english) available at: <http://books.mirror.org/gb.plato.html#phaedrus>

<sup>2</sup> Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Memoria et Remiscentia*. Electronic edition of an english translation (Memory and Reminiscence) available at <http://books.mirror.org/gb.aristotle.html#memory>

<sup>4</sup> Lorenzo Valla, (1407-1457) *Donation of Constantine*. Orig. title: *De Falso Credita et Ementita Constantini Donatione*, (written 1440).

<sup>5</sup> Jean or Johannes Mabillon. Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Electronic edition (english translation: Theologico-Political Treatise) available at <http://books.mirror.org/gb.spinoza.html#theopol>

<sup>6</sup> Georges Duby, *L'Europe des cathedrales 1140-1280* (Geneve) : Editions d'Art Albert Skira, (1966).

<sup>7</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*.I-III. Chicago, Chicago UP, 1984-1988.

<sup>8</sup> Saul Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation : Nazism and the "final Solution"* Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1992.