BEAUTIFYING THE NIGHTMARE:
The Aesthetics of Postmodern History

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History abhors determinism but cannot tolerate chance.¹

The beginning of a new decade is the appropriate time to reflect on certain vital questions concerning our cultural uses of the past. To be sure, it reflects a ‘mysticism of the decade’ to speak of the ‘Roaring Twenties’, or the complacent fifties, or the countercultural sixties, and surely just as much of a decadal mysticism to correct these tags. This habit derives from the ‘centurial mysticism’ which Henri Focillon long ago decried, the poetic fiction that influences most historians -giving centuries personalities, and seeing them as young, old and passing, like people.² It has become traditional to see the decade as a unit, with an identity of its own. Predictions abound, exactly as they do in primitive groups that examine omens and signs about the fate of a newborn. But there is one difference. The primitive culture has folk wisdom; we have experts, who flourish briefly at the turn of each modern decade. In the 1990's, dubbed the ‘Decade of the Mutual Fund’, hypersonic transportation will take us from New York to Los Angeles in half an hour, and women, at least, will look happier about it all because overshadowed eyes and redefined lips will be passé. In short, the pout is out! If you are interested, the food of the 1990s will be dim sum and gnocchi; the wine of the 90s will be Sauvignon Blanc -"a crisp, light flavorful wine." Now you know.

Of course, the turn of a decade is also a time to review past predictions, which is almost more fun than making new ones. Runaway oil prices were forecast for the 1980s; an oil glut occurred. The noted economist Karl Brunner predicted "high and rapid inflation;" it stayed around 4%. The American Cancer Society predicted 8.5 million deaths to that disease in the 1980s, almost double the actual amount.³ Each of us must have a favorite candidate for an absurd prediction by the experts: mine is that the widespread use of personal computers would create the ‘paper-free’ office. Humbug!

The subject of this essay is Terror. Although it may seem odd to say so, I have just given a number of examples. Terror, you ask? Predictions don't scare us much. In fact, we usually get a kick out of this sort of thing. We rational folk, experts ourselves in some way or other, read them, consider their plausibility for a moment, and that is that. It is fun. Very rarely do we

¹ Bernard De Voto, The Course of Empire (Boston 1952), Preface.
do anything momentous, like making an investment in dim sum eateries, on the basis of such expert predictions. In our more generous moments, we must admit that it is not so different from Nancy Reagan's consulting her famous astrologer. By the end of the decade we have forgotten the predictions in our haste to create more for the next decade, except for an occasional curmudgeon who searches yellowed newsprint for old howlers like the ones I have cited.

There is a far more compelling example at hand in 1990, however, which has nothing to do with the turn of the decade. Two years ago no recognized authority, absolutely no one, foresaw the imminent collapse of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe, and perhaps of the Soviet states in the Baltic, the Trans-Caucasus, Mongolia... The form of events has taken everyone by surprise, participants and onlookers, both those who can market their opinions (my working definition of an expert) and those who cannot. Today, the experts are explaining the factors, all well known, that made it happen; some seem commendably chastened, even self-ironic, at least until they are confronted with a rival expert and battles over turf break out, but the predictions go on and on. As our economists, like the late Prof. Brunner, would tell us, where there is a demand, a supply will follow. That prediction, at least, seems a reliable one.

We all know, however, that not all predictions are wrong, or equally wrong. Imagined futures spread out across a very large grid of possibilities, and some of them will be right, while most will not. Ten years ago many believed that unilateral concessions and a nuclear freeze would produce a more flexible Soviet Union, while an American military buildup would only strengthen hard-liners. Remember the demonstrations, the bumper stickers, and lapel buttons? I recall witnessing an eerie piece of political theater in Heidelberg, with ghostly figures marching through town on stilts accompanied by deafening drum rolls. Young Germans have a gift for this sort of righteous apocalypticism. Today, however, it is the supporters of military buildup who loudly claim credit for these Soviet policymakers who finally faced the numbers and threw in their hand, and for the events of the past year. These hawks take special delight that even the Soviet press has used the term 'empire' to describe the military repression in Eastern Europe which it seems about to abandon, and has gone so far as to use the term 'evil' to describe aspects of the pre-perestroika Soviet regime. The Right, on this view, has been proven correct.

For its part, the detente lobby once maintained, like Strobe Talbot writing in Time magazine in 1984, that "Hard times breed hard lines. And hard-liners in Washington, whatever they may think they are doing, actually tend to vindicate hard-liners in Moscow." "They emphasize that recent changes rest, not on policy or the consequences of rational response to great pressures from without, but rather upon the providential appearance of one amazing individual, whom Time, at least, calls the "Man of the Decade." In addition, they can assert that they were correct all along in believing that the Soviet threat was vastly over-rated, a stuffed bear, not a grizzly.

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Both of these views are plausible. If you or I favor one over the other, it is because of political views which we hold and a broader opinion about the general wisdom of one side or the other on a broad range of issues. If I am being honest, I cannot claim that it is on the basis of the evidence, to which both sides in this debate have more or less equal access. Both sides argue from axioms about human political behavior; the axioms simply contradict each other, as axioms regarding human behavior tend to do. The proof of this is that there has been no massive change of political opinion following the current crisis of western communism. Instead, everyone tries to demonstrate that the events confirm his previous position, often despite direct contradiction. Events do not seem to change the explanations that purport to cover them.

All of this is a good deal more sobering than contemplating predictions about 
<em>dim sum</em> and the wine of the decade to come. It still does not seem to merit the name of Terror. We are quite accustomed to the experts being paid to make mistakes, then being paid to explain to us what they were mistaken about. We are remarkably forgiving about expert predictions, even where it counts, from stockbrokers. As Martin Gardner puts it, prediction is "like a chess game. You can predict a couple of moves ahead, but it's almost impossible to predict 30 moves ahead. That's because human beings are playing the game." Where does Terror come in? By Terror here, I mean the simple unaccountability of historical events seen looking forward, and the apparent inevitability of these events seen backwards. (An expert-sounding definition will follow below.) In 1785, who could have foreseen the end of the Old Regime, extermination of the monarchy, dissolution of feudalism, appropriation of the Church, conscription? Who could have imagined the new revolutionary calendar, the metric system, mass execution by machine? These elements could not be fit together in any imagined scene. Getting from here to there looked unthinkable. Yet in 1795 it was all in place, it had a name—the Revolution—and above all it was part of a story that made it comprehensible. It <em>had</em> to be because it could not be changed. All of the 'what-ifs' became trivial, mere dreaming. In that masterpiece of Soviet music, Prokofiev's <em>Peter and the Wolf</em>, Grandfather asks the final question. "And what if Peter had not caught the wolf, what then?" We want to believe, and are meant to believe, I think, that he is a hopeless fuddy-duddy, and <em>thus</em> wrong. His 'what ifs' are not meaningful for 'boys like Peter' who 'are not afraid of wolves.' The distance between the inconceivable and the inevitable, between 1785 and 1795, or between 1917 and 1935, is the Terror of history.

Terror, then, describes the proleptic unimaginableness of what must have happened, seen analeptically. The 'Terror' of history is what must be hidden from view in order to make bearable our position in time. The rites of decadial predictions are the folkways of an information society run by experts to ward off the fact that we have no idea what is coming, as any faithful review of past predictions or the fate of the Hunt brothers or Drexel Burnham Lambert makes clear. Our authorities are these experts; we have nothing with which to replace them but other experts. To decapitate this source of

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5 Quoted in C. Crossen, "The Future is Ours To See", 1.
order leaves a post-Enlightenment culture bereft. In The Dry Salvages, T. S. Eliot wrote of "The backward look behind the assurance/ Of recorded history, the backward half-look/ Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror." This sounds very much like what I have in mind. Even the 'savage mind' seeks assurance in myth and totemic custom, but Levi-Strauss himself notes that "behind all sense there is a non-sense."

It is history, or more precisely 'recorded history', historical discourse, that gives us assurance and hides the 'primitive terror' behind us, obscuring the possibility that a 'non-sense' lurks behind all 'sense'. This terror is only perceivable by looking backward, from a present that faces forward toward the future, and that is aware that it was once itself a future. Historians are embarrassed by the future, and say such things as: "The future is a land of which there are no maps." But the facts are otherwise. We are loaded with maps of the future; they are simply very poor maps. This, however, is not what A.J.P. Taylor had in mind. He meant, surely, that the historian has no business predicting, nor in any way extrapolating from the past or present into the future; philosophy of history, the 'bad' speculative kind, has no place in the sensible minds of responsible, working historians. Historians prophesy the past, the old line goes. Without denying the sacred notion of Thucydides, that history will be judged useful "by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future," the empiricist historian will typically accept knowledge of the future of his subject - i.e. the historian of Bismarck will take World War I into account- but will himself acknowledge no thought of his own future. The history he writes becomes an ironic object aimed backward.

This, however, will not do. Scolding those philosophers who would relegate historical discourse to a merely aesthetic object, concerned folks like Nancy Struver remind us of the historians' responsibility to the future, to what they call social realism, and social action. "The historian must not adopt the radical frivolity of (Richard) Rorty's culture-critic. Rather, he must proceed on the assumption that the communication of the investigative community can be folded into and affect the general communication community." Struver thinks that all of the most interesting critiques of historical discourse restate the premises of R.G. Collingwood, who based our ability to understand past events in our ability to grasp imaginatively the enterprises in which the actors of the past were involved. Because they had intentions which we can come to understand, their deeds become for us answers to questions; when we have intuitively comprehended the question to which some hitherto inexplicable act is the correct answer, then our job of historical empathy has succeeded. Practical action in the social realm is the stuff of historical understanding. We need to remember yesterday in order to make our own social action informed. She adds that "the history of the use of

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6 T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets, "The Dry Salvages."
casuistry is interesting, the history of employed moralisms is not;" but this position is nothing if not an ongoing exercise in employed moralism.

Justifications of history as more than an aesthetic endeavor must consistently appeal to our ability to understand past events, and to make use of this knowledge somehow. Both problems are solved by invoking some theory of action. I know of no more vivid and influential treatment of the philosophical structure of human action in historical time than the image of Aeneas presented by Virgil in the second book of the Aeneid. Troy has fallen, fire, murder, rape, and disrespect are everywhere; all of Aeneas' courage and experience in terrible battles seem like nothing compared to the horror of this chaos. Only the intervention of Jupiter and Venus prevent him from a suicidal foray into the bloody streets. Instead, he gathers his father Anchises, his son Ascanius, and his wife Creusa, and prepares to escape. But recall the exact image which Virgil crafts quite carefully and memorably: Aeneas takes the old man on his back, while leading his son by the hand. His wife, his link to natural life and its familiar comforts, followed, and disappeared. Aeneas was entering the realm of history and its bewildering burdens.

The Western philosophy of action is foreshadowed here in this image of Aeneas. The present is the unique moment of strength which bears the past as both its burden and as its source of moral meaning. The past is holy; to carry it a sacred duty. Because only father Anchises had hands which were untainted with blood that awful night of the holocaust of Troy, only he could carry the bag with the household gods. The future, on the other hand, is small, aimless, and in need of direction by the force of the present. Yet it also the evident reason for the effort. It was over the boy's head that a tongue of flame had appeared in a divine message that convinced the reluctant old Anchises to flee the burning city. The future is a promise that can inspire superhuman effort, even in the face of exhaustion and despair. This image of the three-fold nature of human action within the great holocaust that begins the Western literary tradition is narrated by Aeneas to Dido in the midst of her half-built city. It is thus a flashback, an analepsis. They stand opposite the temple of Juno where the events of the recent Trojan War are recorded in murals so detailed as to make Aeneas weep. This city, when complete, will be Carthage, itself a repetitive, reborn version of Tyre, the Phoenician city where Dido, like Aeneas, had lost a beloved spouse in the bitter past. And Carthage will be Rome's great enemy in the distant future to Aeneas and Dido, which is the distant past both to Virgil and all readers of the Aeneid. The interplay of past, present, and future, their inseparability, is Virgil's well-known theme in this epic. Augustine, a great reader of Virgil, finds his own concept of time as a three-fold present represented here: the present of the past as memory, the present of the present as experience, the present of the future as expectation. These three, of course, memoria, contuitus, and expectatio, exist at one moment in one soul. The Augustinian present is trinitarian, three-in-one, but the figure is Virgilian. Heidegger and Ricoeur, among others in a long philosophical tradition, all pay implicit

10 Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, Book XI, Ch. 20.
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tribute to this Aeneas image of action in the three-fold present. Its influence is very extensive.

Virgil has more to say on the matter, though. In Book VI, the Underworld, Aeneas meets his deceased father again, who praises the courage and devotion necessary to come even there to do homage to memory. Yet immediately before the late Ancbises begins his discourse on the nature of the universe and the future of Rome, he points out to Aeneas a far-off river, Lethe, where throngs of people drink the waters of forgetfulness so that they may enter again the world of the living as reborn souls. Aeneas, although only half way through the epic which bears his name, has had his fill of life and wonders why anyone would want to return; he characteristically does not reply to Anchises' involved stoic explanation. For our purposes here, however, I want only to make clear that Virgil also knew what Nietzsche would emphasize again and again. The spirit of life comes from forgetfulness. Memory is suffering and incomprehension, however desirable or noble or necessary the goal. The Aeneid is soaked in history, in purposeful human events; it is meant to serve as a guide to the reading of history. The shield of Aeneas, forged in book VIII, is covered with a visual narrative of the future events of Roman history, presented in great detail. They mean nothing to the one who must carry the shield, Aeneas, for whom they are prolepses; the characters and events are utterly foreign. He must trust and obey the gods, who have been anything but kind to him. Yet these future (past) events, leading up to the Augustan polity which the Aeneid celebrates in its highly ambivalent way, provide the motive for his suffering. The virtue of 'pious Aeneas' derives from his willingness to suffer on faith alone.

When Aeneas finally reaches the site of what would be Rome many centuries after him, he is given a tour of the area by the local ruler. In an odd turn, Virgil has his hero view the ruins of much older cities on Rome's hills, a scene which may have inspired Gibbon's similar musings among the ruins of classical Rome, musing which inspired The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. The position of Aeneas, thinking forward to the future, looking back at the ruined walls like those of his own Troy, must have struck Virgil's Augustan audience as uncanny. If we place Gibbon into this mix, it begins to look like a set of fun-house mirrors, with a disturbing knack of confusing past and present realities. The terror noted by Eliot, coming from the backward glance, surfaces, and with it, a concern for aesthetic judgment.

We think of Edmund Burke as the farsighted political analyst who accurately foresaw in 1790, the future of the French Revolution: not only the rise of a military dictator, the name of which he could not know, but also general philosophy of the Reign of Terror, the name of which he also did not know. Terror, however, was not a new concept to Burke; he had discussed it at some length in his A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful of 1757 as an aesthetic principle, the principle of the Sublime. In Burke's account, the passion called Sublime freezes the soul

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11 Even an ideological opponent of Burke's like Fredric Jameson considers him "one of the most creative and permanently fascinating of the great class enemies." A signal honor, this.
in astonishment and horror. Obscurity, power, vastness, suddenness characterize this Sublime, which shows its power by short-circuiting our ability to act, precisely by blocking the ability to extrapolate future from past. Fear, above all, causes this inability to act. Burke writes: "Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime."(58) It is as though, within the realm of the Sublime, the ruling Terror decapitates us, that is, makes us lose our heads, by severing past from future, leaving us without the burdens of Anchises and Ascanius. Burke's Sublime, however much it "fills the mind with grand ideas, and turns the soul in upon itself," looks to the obscure darkness of the non-sense behind all sense. 13

In suggesting that the three-fold nature of natural time, divorced from the unifying, comforting philosophy of action, is the essence of what Hayden White has called the "historical sublime," I am taking literally a hint by Kant, found in a footnote in the Critique of Judgment, where he comments that the most sublime thought ever expressed was the inscription over the Temple of Isis: "I am all that is and that was and that shall be, and no mortal hath lifted my veil." I read this note as having two parts: first, a reference to the three-fold nature of time, and second, an assertion that it cannot be known by mortals. A historical sublime must flow from this, although nature is the usual focus of sublimity. Schiller's essay On the Sublime fills out the historical sublime which Kant neglected; he can do so by retaining the notion that human emotions, if not human reason, are a part of nature, but operative in history. Thus history, like nature, provides us with spectacles of 'bizarre savagery', and 'spiritual disorder' which will bring on the confusion of our encounter with the supersensuous which Kant had described in the third critique. This confusion must not be repressed in a spurious "attempt to assimilate this lawless chaos of appearances to a cognitive unity;" it is the contemplation of the independence of this 'wild incoherence' that brings us to understand this historical sublime as analogous to the independence of pure reason from nature. In both cases, the result is freedom.

Order without freedom is morally contemptable. Schiller adds: "Viewed from this aspect and only from this, world history appears to me a sublime object." Kant put the Beautiful and Sublime side by side; like Wordsworth and Goethe, he wanted to reconcile them. However, if we view the beautiful as

14 Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore 1987) 68-72.
17 Ibidem, 204.
18 Ibidem, 206.
19 Ibidem.
that which unifies, allies the faculties, and makes concord out of discord, then
the reconciliation is always an unbalanced one. All reconciliations of the
beautiful and sublime are beautifications of the sublime. Psychologically, the
terror becomes a thrill, the thrill a fancy. A nineteenth-century German
counter-tradition, to be sure, tried to resist any reconciliation. Nietzsche later
opposed them as Apollinian and Dionysian, just as Schopenhauer had
juxtaposed Darstellung and Wille. The great dualizer, Freud, deployed the
most varied array of tropes for the the Beautiful and Sublime, giving us the
conscious and unconscious, the ego and the id, the manifest expression and
the latent repression, primary and secondary processes, etcetera. We know
that Freud used the concept of ‘sublimation’ to describe the reconciliation of
opposing instincts, but the question arises whether he found any correspon­
ding dynamic function of ‘beautification’ exists. I think he did.

There is an intellectual function in us which demands unity, connection and intelligibi­
li ty from any material, whether of perception or thought, that comes within its grasp;
and if, as a result of special circumstances, it is unable to establish a true connection,
it does not hesitate to fabricate a false one. Systems constructed in this way are
known to us not only from dreams, but also from phobias, from obsessive thinking,
and from delusions.

This intellectual function Freud calls ‘secondary revision’ (or elaboration). It is
a concept which gives psycho-analysis a lot of trouble, but I think it crucial
for that very reason to the problems at hand here. Secondary revision is
that aspect of the ‘dream-work’ which, under the power of the censorship,
takes the chaotic, contradictory, and quite unacceptable desires of the uncon­
scious, and transforms them into a simulacrum of orderly reality, the manifest
content of the dream, with clear and distinct characters and temporal pro­
gression. In other words, it emplots. Despite its name, ‘secondary revision’
takes place simultaneously with the rest of the dream-work, and is thus a part
of the ‘primary processes’ of the unconscious. The form of the dream is
provided by ‘secondary revision’ for the purpose of disguising the content; but
because secondary revision does not follow the dream thoughts in the timeless
unconscious, we apparently find them always already revised. The first step of
psychoanalysis is to break the dream into pieces, so as to frustrate the revisi­
onary process from the start. Clearly, the aesthetic function of ‘secondary
revision’ is to produce a beautiful object, which will satisfy the sleeper by
disguising the disturbing chaos of the dream-thoughts.

Freud’s therapeutic goal in psycho-analysis is to decode the aesthetic
object (e.g. dream) which beautifies the dream-thoughts, and to re-encode
them into a wish that has its origins in the past, its power in the present, and
its imagined goal in the future. He wants to rebuild an Aeneas image for the
patient so as to make relatively free action possible. This re-encoding,
however, involves an uncanny repetition of the work of secondary elaboration
(Bearbeitung), which offers the possibility that the conscious constructions of
psycho-analysis may be as deluded and obsessive as the surface of a dream.
In short, the 'primitive terror' here is that the Aeneas image may be only a
fantasy of surfaces. These suggestions lead toward the notion put forth by
structuralists several decades ago, that narrativity, that function of language
which resolves discord into concord by means of imposing a plot structure on
happenings, according to Paul Ricoeur, is no more and no less than an
aesthetic beautification of chaotic mere existence. The statement of Levi-
Strauss which we have already encountered says that a non-sense lies behind
all sense. It is beginning to look as though what the philosophers once called
'the beautiful' is what we now call 'narrativity'. Narrativity makes all kinds of
sense.
There is a certain sort of mind for which everything is connected to everyt-
thing else. Often we see this mind as paranoid, a searcher for conspiracies. E.
M. Forster's dictum 'only connect!' may epitomize it, after all. But it is also
the moral precept of the modern historian. The other view, 'Disconnect!' is
the attitude of the formalist, the aestheticist of whom Foucault is the fore-
most exemplar. It is just as cognitively responsible as the former, despite the
endless hectoring of the connectors, who insist on the reality of the connect-
ed, emploted, universe, and of the connections they have fashioned. But ours
is just as responsibly viewed as a universe of things. These are essentially
contested matters.
Lovers of the beautiful have had the moral high road for as long as
beauty has been a concept. The remarks of Nancy Struever cited earlier, to
the effect that historical reflection in the mode of continuity is necessary to
any sense of a social mission simply restates Kant's opinion that interest in
the beautiful is characteristic of sociability, the work of a good soul.23 To
suggest that history may not take the form of a narrative, which is to say,
may not be organized around the Aeneas image of intentional human events,
is disquieting. Some very long books have been written recently to prove that
it is not so. The possibility of a universe of natural things without inherent
meaning is reappearing in the postmodern historical world. Objections to
assertions of the non-narrative nature of human life tend to come from the
phenomenological tradition and to base their claims for the narrative quality
of experience on pragmatics, the philosophy of action. In the case of Paul
Ricoeur, it is the human self-consciousness as an agent that defines our
essentially narrative sense of life. Because purposeful human actions, whatever
their outcome, imply at the moment of action which is the present, the simul-
taneous presence of a past which has somehow bequeathed a problem which
the action will alleviate, and a future which will result from the action and
which is its goal, a triple present joining past, present, and future is experi-
ced. This triple presence is the foundation of human action, and has a
narrative form.24 In this general line of phenomenological thought, David
Carr goes so far as to suggest that stories are in fact "told in being lived and

23 Kant, Critique of Judgment, 139, 141.
24 Ricoeur's monumental Time and Narrative (in 3 volumes, trans. D. Pellauer and K.
Blamey, (Chicago 1984-1987) works out the implications of this view.
lived in being told." Carr maintains that the practical structures of life experience govern the narrative patterning of action, life, and history before any literary or cognitive cultural processes obtain. Because he believes that historical writing is an extension of historical existence, that discourse, in effect, is life, rather than something entirely different, Carr suggests that historical consciousness, and, by extension, fictional consciousness as well, are fundamentally based on life experience, and derive only possible examples of narrative form from their culture. "But (cultural forms) do not provide the narrative form itself."

Before the First World War, when history still held a major place on bookshelves and large sets were big sellers, a set of books was published called The Historians' History of the World. They frequently turn up today in used book shops because they were published in large runs by the Encyclopedia Britannica, and went through five editions between 1904 and 1926. In many ways they were a counterpart to the classic Eleventh Edition of the Britannica, still treasured by many of us retrograde humanists as the flower of imperial culture. The Historians' History of the World is not similarly treasured today, although in many ways it has the same general strengths as the encyclopedia. The reason that The Historians' History is now a curiosity is in its remarkable, but oddly disquieting, narrative form.

The volumes themselves followed a standard format, beginning with Egypt, Greece and Rome, then moving on into modern national histories. The twenty-seven volumes of the fifth edition included two volumes of essays on 'Our Changing Times', and an index to the entire set. Each subdivision contained its own chronology, each page its running date at the top, and up-to-date bibliographies. The standards for future, less ambitious, surveys were being established here. There was, however, one important innovation. The editors tell us: 'The main bulk of the work is made up of direct quotations from authorities, cited with scrupulous exactness; but so novel is our method of handling this material that the casual reader might scan chapter after chapter without suspecting that the whole is not the work of a single writer.'

The idea behind the work was to assemble the writing of the best historians, not as a collection or an anthology of books or chapters, but rather as a smooth, unified, readable, narrative text. Within each volume, the narrative looked seamless; every once in a while, a tiny 'superior' letter marks the end of the work of a given historian, whose name you can learn by checking the key at the back of the volume; for the precise edition and page of the passage cited, you need only turn to Volume 27, the Bibliographical Index.

In their enthusiasm for this solution to the major problem of historical survey, namely the large and growing body of unsurpassed, expert, accounts, the editors counsel us readers that, while it may look complex, we shall find it 'admirably simple and effective in practice'. And they are right. If you want the source of each passage, you can find it; if you don't, you, the 'casual

25 David Carr, Time, Narrative, and History (Bloomington 1986) 61.
26 Carr, Time, 85.
reader', -the very concept of which is, I might insert here, perhaps the true flower of imperial culture- really might never know that this work is not the product of one pen. The problems of such a venture are briefly recounted in the introductory volume.

It is perhaps hardly necessary to explain that direct quotations, such as go to make up the bulk of our work, are often given in an abbreviated form through the omission of matter that is redundant or, for any reason, inadmissible. The necessity for such a change is obvious, since otherwise the varied materials could not possible be made to harmonize or meet the needs of our space. But beyond this, no liberty whatever is taken with matter presented as a direct quotation.28

The system is further elucidated in the Bibliographical Index in the final volume. The initial plan had been to cite each reference in place, but the frequent existence of pages containing several sources, pages the editors refer to as "artistic mosaics" pointed to the flaw in this plan, which would "break in on the flow of the narrative, threatening the very essentials of the work as an artistic production, and making alarming demands upon space."29 Further, since even the best authorities make mistakes or are superseded in detail, the standard approach, a demurring footnote, would further disrupt the artistic integrity of the venture, which, as science, required omissions of error and substitutions of "new discoveries" to achieve "an unbroken narrative which is authoritative and up to date." Thus, both art and science are well served by The Historians' History of the World.

The tiny superscript reference letter marks the end of one voice and the beginning of a new one. Yet the term voice is hardly proper here. The idea is to deny the existence of any voice at all. The artistic aspect of the enterprise has nothing to do with the concept of 'style' in history; in theory, it scarcely can desire a gathering of the best historical artists. Style evokes the individual, l'homme même, as Buffon defined it, while the aesthetic of The Historians' History of the World is the flow of the authoritative narrative. A meta-voice replaces the individual voices. It is the voice of voices, which controls and replaces the nightmare of historical science, which is the individual voice.

The intense professionalization of historical study in the late nineteenth century, and the endless demand for historical work on the part of the public led to an increased sophistication, and with it, a discomfiting recognition that history is written by historians, and that they are many and competing.30 The older dream of resurrecting a past, as Michelet put it, allowing the dead to speak again, had to give way, at least a little, to a nightmare of competing voices. In the Historians' History these chaotic voices are beautifully reconciled. E pluribus unum! Almost miraculously, a potentially sublime heteroglossia of authorities becomes smooth narrative, what Bakhtin might call the ideal

29 Ibidem, Vol. 27, 567.
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authoritarian discourse, the authority of authorities. Actual historical voices are individual, discordant, confused; the great voice of The Historians’ History is impersonal yet authentic, concordant yet scientific, coherent yet varied. It is a classic allegory of narrativity.

At the same time, the The Historians’ History of the World manages to come to terms with the essential problem posed by modernism, namely how to relate what Eliot juxtaposed as “tradition and the individual talent.” Here, in a sense, is the crux of the scandal of historiography. The iconoclastic move in historical discourse is revisionism, which seeks to alter the tradition, but never to deny tradition itself as the guarantor of the unity of the past and the identity of the subject of history. Constrained in this way, revisionism is profoundly conservative because of its utter dependence upon a certain idea of a total story, a larger voice whose enunciations may find themselves in need of occasional correction. Thus, quite out of fashion as a model of the historical enterprise, The Historians’ History of the World is an embarrassment because it is no more and no less than a representation of the modern professional vision of historical reality.

Jean-Francois Lyotard suggests that the postmodern attitude toward a decentralized world of capital and communications, in which foci of power cannot be located and revolution is neither possible nor desirable as a form of resistance, is in essence another dispute about realism. Yet if ideology, as White presents it, is always a dispute over who shall have the authority to present the Real, then the modern world, instead, asserts what Lyotard calls the unreality of reality. 31 This loss of reality, which was heralded by the decline of academic art and the rise of mass reproduction of images, makes any sense of reality either nostalgic or parodic, hardly a source of reassurance about the world. Although Walter Benjamin, and before him Friedrich Nietzsche, described the consequences of this unreality of reality, it is to Kant again that we must go to find the concept which defines it. According to Lyotard, Kant saw in the subllime a true conflict of the faculties which arises when the imagination cannot present an object that matches what we are capable of conceiving, the unpresentable. Modern art which destroys all faith in realistic representation is incomprehensible without this Kantian idea of the "incommensurability of reality and concept."32 With a striking similarity to Stendhal’s statement that all Classic art was Romantic in its own day, Lyotard suggests that all modern art was first postmodern, that postmodernism is modernism in its nascent stage.33 In a phrase reminiscent of the French Romantic debate about Shakespeare’s romanticism, Lyotard notes that the postmodern artist is working without rules, is making up the rules, so as to establish "the rules of what will have been done." The word itself expresses "the paradox of the future (post) anterior (modo)."34 Lyotard concludes:

32 Lyotard, Postmodern Condition, 79.
33 The Stendhal quotation, "All great writers were romantics in their own day," is from Racine and Shakespeare (1823). Cited in H. Hugo, ed. The Romantic Reader (New York 1957) 60.
34 Lyotard, Postmodern Condition, 81.
Finally, it must be clear that our business is not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. And it is not to be expected that this task will effect the last reconciliation between language games (which, under the name of the faculties, Kant knew to be separated by a chasm), and that only the transcendental illusion (that of Hegel) can hope to totalize them into a real unity. But Kant also knew that the price to pay for such an illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. These reflections have brought us back to Terror again, but it seems to be a different version. The terror which Lyotard attributes to Kant is a terror of totalization, of reconciliation, even of beautification. This seems not to be the "primitive terror" I have been sketching up to now, but rather a terror born of the need for the order that a great meta-narrative provides. We are face to face with the real historical Terror, the one known to Kant and Schiller, the bicentennial of which is only three years away, for those who love celebrations. Right now, we have a unique opportunity to look forward to looking back on it; it is a foreshadowed retrospection, a proleptic analepsis. "Terror is the order of the day," proclaimed the National Convention in the year '93. The ambiguity of these familiar words -terror, order, day- is striking. Order of the day, of course, is a military figure of speech, suitable to a proclamation by a junta trying to rule a nation at war within and without. Order, however, is the last thing we associate with Terror, the emotion of the vast disorder in nature and the human soul, at least from the standpoint of the eighteenth century. Day, the unit of human time placed between yesterday and tomorrow, is the distillation of the philosophy of action.

I want to end by considering the case of a recent history of the French Revolution by Simon Schama, a book called Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution. My treatment will perhaps frustrate French historians, who, if the reviews of Schama's book are an indication, are passionately concerned over questions like his treatment of the royal debt, the degree of aristocratic patriotism, or whether the Old Regime could truly be called agriculturally progressive. All of these matters deserve careful attention. However, I should like to stress one other, more basic point, which, in my judgment, influences and shapes all of these concerns about historical factors. It is a formal point. Like all linguistic enterprises, historical texts have genres, and are shaped by generic considerations. To overlook the matter of genre is often to ask the wrong questions, in effect missing the point. So we should begin by inquiring what kind of a book is this? The title is Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution. It is very much a product of the bicentennial, an ambitious, publisher-driven enterprise by a nakedly ambitious historian, whose earlier book, The Embarrassment of Riches, captures in its title some of the dynamism behind this one.

35 Ibidem, 81-82.
When, at the very start of his preface, Schama cites Zhou En-lai's consciously inscrutable remark that it is still too soon to tell what the significance of the French revolution may be, he adds in a parenthesis, "or, possibly, too late." This statement of the inadequacy of any temporal perspective to the discovery of 'significance' is a clear indication of the relevance of this work to our considerations here. Following a lot of discussion among historians during the past decade about the formal significance of historical discourse, Schama begins his book by defending his choice of genre. Also following the course of a lot of discussion of genres among historians, he quickly puts himself into a muddle. "I have chosen to present these arguments in the form of a narrative. If, in fact, the Revolution was a much more haphazard and chaotic event and much more a product of human agency than structural conditioning, chronology seems indispensable in making its complicated twists and turns intelligible."(xv) Here, Schama makes two fundamental errors concerning historical discourse. The first is that the alternative to narrative is analysis, especially quantitative analysis. Schama then repeats, and may believe, a corollary error, that narrative is the proper form for chronology, that narrative and chronicle are, in fact, virtually synonymous. His chronology-driven text will return to the "form of the nineteenth-century chronicles," eschewing even the minor accommodations to social analysis found in those conventional chapters on the economy, or the peasantry, or the nobility, chapters that make narrative histories look up-to-date and fashionably bottoms-up in their approach. These non-chronicled units privilege the explanatory force of the allegorical socio-economic units which they describe. Schama will have none of it.

His comments on narrative are interesting. Rejecting the notion, which he attributes to Hayden White, that narrative is nothing other than the means of placing "a reassuring order" on random events, Schama appeals to the work of David Carr. Carr, in Schama's telling, believes that narrative accords properly with the actual self-understanding of historical actors, who view themselves as situated "between role models from an heroic past and expectations of the judgment of posterity."(xvi) This appeal to the Aeneas image seems to make narrative understanding oddly mimetic, as though the form of Schama's presentation mimes the form of his "citizens" consciousness. Whatever the merits of Carr's defense of narrative understanding as having some natural basis, in human nature, to be precise, Schama's wording totally invalidates its relevance to his book. He tells us that his work, far from being a "mischievously old-fashioned piece of storytelling" from pre-Tocqueville days, differs in that it is witness rather than judgment. The philosophy of action, with its foundation in three-fold time, is cast aside. Intention has no great status in Schama's vision, except as a perpetually blind force driving people toward unenvisioned destinations.

The proper form for this is presented as the chronicle, which Schama, in his considerable ambivalence, has acknowledged in his title. However, to see chronicle as the structural spine of narrative is quite wrong. Insofar as *Citizens* is narrative, it is no chronicle; insofar as it is chronicle, it is no narrative. Chronicle is narrative with the philosophy of action removed. And yet he is also in a sense right; his errors and ambivalences, such as they are, make this work much more interesting and successful (that is to say, timely)
than either a proper chronicle (almost unthinkable), an ‘old-fashioned’ narrative in the Jacobin-Marxist tradition, or a new model narrative based on quantitative analyses would be. To emphasize ‘citizens’, as Schama does, is a sign of his resolute refusal to quantify. This refusal to quantify is precisely his rejection of a certain narrativity, because the quantification of modern social history is the purest of narrative forms. Without unified allegorical characters, in the form of classes, groups, economic trends, etcetera, any history becomes a mass of stories, and narrative, the ultimate abstracting function, impossible. 37 Schama faces a potential embarrassment by comparison with The Historians’ History of the World. If the editors of that work had failed at their task of narrative reconciliation, would we not want to call it precisely Historians: A Chronicle of the World? Is not this the source of the work’s quaintness?

Against his will, and probably unawares, Schama has written a postmodern history of the French Revolution, in the guise of the good old humane story. Rejecting the meta-narrative patterns of the historiographic tradition, he has produced a sort of chronicle that mocks the question ‘why?’ As ‘witness’ to the actions of these ‘citizens’ Schama offers us spectacle; and this spectacle, without the beautifying explanations of narrative historical understandings, visions of a wretched past and of a better future, presents us with a naked scene of violence. The Terror is primitive terror, mere violence which is not an aspect of a much larger, totalized story, but is rather the center of the spectacle itself. As Nietzsche suggests in On The Genealogy of Morals, the bygone age of public cruelty was more enjoyable than our own era, in which pleasure in suffering has taken on ever more refined forms. Above all, back then, the spectator was king, as it were, because the spectacle was just what it was, without a moralizing gloss that sublates it into a higher, deeper cause or omelet.

The Aeneas image of past, present and future united in a single active intentional moment is everywhere satirized, ‘powers of recall’ create absurdities, ‘expectations’ fail. The aesthetic terror of Eliot, of Kant, of Burke becomes the ‘order of the day’, unbeautified by meta-narrative and largely inexplicable, except, perhaps, by some deep and fundamental flaw in the citizens. “In some depressingly unavoidable sense, violence was the Revolution.”(xv) The unavoidability, as I have presented it here, comes from the formal choices Schama has made, the confusion of chronicled spectacle with narrated lives which creates the confusion in the book and the confusion of events. Critics who assert that Schama never explains where the Revolution came from, or that his explanation of the events after 1792 seem confused, are assuming precisely the formal world that Schama is questioning. 38 It is

37 This is not the place to point out that the old-fashioned nineteenth-century narratives were generally more conceptually self-aware than most of the professional historiography since; I shall leave that task to others, and merely recommend two recently published books Linda Orr’s Headless History: Romantic Historians of the French Revolution, and Lionel Gossman’s Between History and Literature, as well as two forthcoming works, Philippe Carrard’s study of the poetics of the Annales school, and Stephen Bann’s collected historical essays, which should be along soon as well.

Beautifying the nightmare

the mirror image of John Morley's comment in the old Britannica: "Burke's vital error was his inability to see that a root and branch revolution was, under the conditions, inevitable."

Schama says that the Revolution is 'about' violence, that violence was the point of it all, not a means to any end. The philosophy of action, which sanctions narrativity, relates intention to goals; Schama breaks the link. Violence is violence, the Terror was terror, not any necessary, regrettable pain in the childbirth of a new social system that will call Terror order. There is no deeper, philosophical story which can be transposed onto the events to show a future that derives from them. They exist in a time of their own, cut off from past and future. Terror. Schama's vision is "depthless," as Fredric Jameson might say of the postmodern vision; but this does not mean that it is wrong. It offers us another depth, I would say, the abyss of the sublime. I say this, noting at the same time that my explanation is a narrative beautification, a reconciliation.

Pornography and sexual slanders play a large part in Schama's version of the Revolution. To cite one prominent example, in Chapter 6, 'Body Politics', the first section, titled 'Uterine Furies and Dynastic Obstructions', begins with a detailed account of the famous Diamond Necklace Affair, which helped to destroy Queen Marie-Antoinette's reputation. This event is "often treated as a scandalous sideshow," (204) but Schama does not recognize sideshows. It was "mysterious" that innocent Marie-Antoinette should have been smeared by the affair, but this was made possible by the "rich and unsavory vein of court pornography" which Schama describes, quotes, and illustrates (including, among others, a print of Lafayette with his hand on the Queen's naked Res Publica). After a few pages on the Queen's friend, the painter Elizabeth Vigee-Lebrun, we are back to the pornographic slander, which was bolstered by the "titillation masquerading as edification" in the expert medical literature of the 1780s. The conclusion of this section is the accusation during her trial that the Queen had sexually abused her son.

Or, consider the last two pages of the Epilogue, which describes the fate of Theroigne de Mericourt. Theroigne, whom we have confronted only once, four hundred pages earlier, as the sexually and politically liberated "Amazon" of the Revolution, (462-3) was set upon in 1793 by Montagnard market women while she was speaking for the Societe des Femmes Republicaines. She survived, but was permanently deranged thereafter, spouting an unstoppable delirium of revolutionary jargon. She was a "living museum of half-forgotten and embarrassing slogans." The autopsy, performed by the leading authority on insanity, found the problem in an "irregular alignment of her colon."(874) Schama, nevertheless, sees in Theroigne "a person of almost sublime transparency and presocial innocence." The Revolution lived in her in

40 All attempts to reconcile, or mediate, the beautiful and the sublime absorb the sublime into the beautiful, because the beautiful is precisely that which mediates. I have discussed this at greater length in "As Real As It Gets: Ricoeur and Narrativity" in Philosophy Today (forthcoming).
pure form, "undisturbed by the quotidian mess of the human condition." End of book.

In this allegory (Theroigne, delirious, poignantly absurd, and untimely = the heritage of the Revolution), Schama re-enacts Marx's famous misquotation of Hegel: first tragedy, then farce. She becomes literally the 'intermediary moral body' between the signifier of the revolutionary tradition (and Jacobin historiography) and the signified Revolution. The postmodern allegorist willfully creates this intermediary as a link, although he knows and points to its artificiality.41 'Transparency' and 'innocence' may lie in this example of the "hysterical sublime," as Jameson would call it, but the use of it to end this history is anything but innocent. Theroigne is revolutionary reality. She was there, she acted, she suffered. Yet her discourse, from the frozen museum of her mind, de-realizes the Revolution, embarrassing any attempt to signify it. Like many others, Schama clearly finds Tocqueville the revelatory figure in his historical thought. I would go so far as to claim that Tocqueville is the crucial postmodern historian. The reason for this rediscovery of Tocqueville, in my opinion, goes far beyond politics, although politics are certainly crucial. Tocqueville, you will recall, posited a revolution which had already been undertaken and concluded under the Old Regime. In setting out to accomplish what had already been done, the French Revolution was impossible, being over before it began, and had no proper task. Revolution was literally impossible. Its happening was made possible and impossible by the prior accomplishment of what it intended to do. The Revolution for Tocqueville is involved in the "paradox of the future (post) anterior (modo)," what will have been done, in Lyotard's words.42 At the same time, Tocqueville's principal concern was centralization and its effects, the dissolution of localisms and individualities in the urban, mass-centered modern world, the world of class, the factory, and coal-and-steam technology. With the new electronic technology of information that de-centers and re-localizes, we may ask whether Tocqueville has not given us an image of a premodern world which was already nostalgic in the 1850's, suggestive, at least, as a Utopian image of what we cannot recover.

The terror before the sublime that Burke describes depends upon the danger to the body, its physical integrity and limits of size and strength. Similarly, Roland Barthes identification of fear and bliss in The Pleasure of the Text is based upon its threat to the integrity of the psychological subject.43 Bliss, like the sublime, takes one out of oneself, free of commitments. Schama's version of the historical sublime goes a step farther; it fragments neither the body nor the subject, but rather the allegorical characters from which the ideological meta-narratives are created. The mid-18th century saw

41 Paul Smith, "The Will to Allegory In Postmodernism," Dalhousie Review, 62 (1982) 120. Smith notes: "Allegory thence becomes the gesture of an obsessive player who knows that the game is already lost, but who continues to play." (113).
many plural concepts become singularized, even totalized. Freedoms became Freedom; rights became Justice; progressions became Progress; revolutions became the Revolution. As I have noted above, Schama neglects the apparatus of classes, orders, covering-terms. The book is about 'citizens', not the 'people'.

Above all, in the eighteenth century, histories became History, the big story. Following from the loss of an unchanging sense of human nature and natural law, natural history and human history became separated as genres and modes of inquiry. The rule of one was mere change in a world of mere things; the rule of the other was progress. Only in the future could the meaning of the past become clear; the small boy, Ascanius, we might say, is now leading the way and calling the shots. As Sieyes, the revolutionary, put it: "To judge what happens according to what has already happened means, it seems to me, to judge the familiar in terms of the unfamiliar." An absurdity. Kant was the first to formalize this "modern system of historical experience," by suggesting that the future will keep repeating past experiments in revolution until it finally gets it right. 1789 is a watershed year for the conservative, liberal, and socialist; for each of them, that year provided the basis for predictions upon which ideologies would be built.

Postmodernism is one of the things that may happen when the Aeneas image fails, and the philosophy of action cannot see the present as properly three-fold. This is the terror which historical narrativity effectively hides from us. Whatever the value of Citizens as a work of history, and I think it is considerable, it is worth our attention because, in restoring individuals to a pre-totalized narrative condition, a ‘quotidian’ mess, it steps back from the civilized Terror of totalized meta-narratives to the primitive terror of the historical sublime, a version of the non-sense which lies behind all sense. This is a long way, perhaps, from speculation about the future of the ‘pout’, or the fate of dim sum in the 1990s, but the problematic at work is the same. I am inclined to agree with Paul de Man that the very idea of postmodernity is but a parody of modernity, that is, just another period concept despite its purpose of undercutting the essentializing tyrannies of period concepts. To speak of postmodernism, then, is already to name and narrativize it, and to place it within the ‘order of the day’. This seems to be inescapable for us. We do experience our world in narrative form, whether it has a storied essence ‘in itself’ or not. Still, the surfacing of the historical sublime from time to time, from place to place, reminds us that however much ours has become a ‘culture of history’, there is nevertheless a realm of mere natural things behind it which it is dangerous to forget in our remembering, our passion to historicize. Knowing this suggests that we are not fated to be any particular thing at all, including postmodern. Fredric Jameson writes:

If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random

difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable.45

Perhaps he is right. A cultural dominant, such as Jameson posits in calling postmodernism "the cultural logic of late capitalism," is necessary to the allegorizing force of meta-narrative. However, it is useful to recall that Jameson's slogan, "Always historicize!" is more than just "the 'transhistorical imperative' of all dialectical thought."46 It is a call to assume a particular stance with regard to human events. But there are many other valid and properly historical ways of considering the human past than historicizing it. The 'primitive terror' of 'sheer heterogeneity' may produce the Great Terrors as reaction formations. The necessity of cultural mapping has its dangers.