Truth, Narrative, and the Materiality of Memory: An Externalist Approach in the Philosophy of History

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'The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself' – Maurice Merleau-Ponty[1]

1. Introducing Externalism

One of the most influential and significant developments in the philosophy of language over the last thirty years, a development that also spills out into epistemology and the philosophy of mind, has been the rise of externalist conceptions of content. Put simply, such conceptions take content, whether understood as belonging to a mental state such as a belief or desire or to a linguistic utterance that is the expression of such a state, to be determined not by what is 'inside' our heads, but by what is 'outside'. Such externalism takes a variety of forms. The causal theory of reference associated with Kripke and Putnam is an example of one type of externalism – an externalism according to which meaning is determined by the causal history that lies behind the use of a term (a history that goes back to an initial 'baptism').[2] Tyler Burge's

social externalism or 'anti-individualism' is another example. According to Burge the meanings of our words are determined, not by any intention we may have in speaking, but rather by the social context in which we speak, and as a result what we mean may not always be what we think we say.[3] For Donald Davidson the meanings of utterances and the content of attitudes is to be found by identifying the entities and events that cause those attitudes and utterances. Thus, in Davidson's formulation, "we must, in the plainest and methodologically most basic cases, take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief. And what we, as interpreters, must take them to be is what in fact they are."[4]

Just as there has been relatively little engagement between recent philosophy of language and philosophy of history,[5] so externalist theories of content have not so far been taken up, at least not in any explicit way, within contemporary historical or historiographical thinking. Yet as an account of the nature and structure of meaning, externalism is not only relevant to attempts to analyse the nature of historical meaning and understanding, but it can also be brought into direct connection with certain of the ways in which history and memory have been thematized over recent years – in particular with the emphasis on their concrete materiality and localisation.[6] Moreover, as it is developed in Davidson's work, externalism also has a bearing on issues of truth and objectivity – on the way in which discourse, including historical discourse, relates to its objects.

In what follows, my aim will not be so much to attempt a comprehensive defence of an externalist approach (although some of the arguments in favour of externalism will certainly figure in my discussion) nor to survey externalism in its entirety, but rather to explore the implications of a particular form of externalism (one that owes much of its inspiration to Davidson's work) for thinking about history, and in so doing to suggest one way (even if perhaps an idiosyncratic one) in which contemporary philosophy of language may engage with contemporary philosophy of history. Much of my discussion will be focussed on a set of issues in the philosophy of language, and the elaboration of the basic elements of the externalism that is at stake here, along with the holistic approach to content with which it is closely connected. This may seem like something of a long detour to get to the philosophy of history, but if so, then it is a necessary detour. It is precisely though the understanding of certain key issues in the philosophical approach to language that we can arrive at a better understanding of some of the central ideas in the philosophical approach to history.

2. Beginning with Language

There are many different ways of arriving at an externalist conception of content, and not all such theories involve the same conception either of

content or the manner of its externalist determination. Externalism thus names a broad grouping of approaches within contemporary philosophy of language rather than a well-defined position. Moreover, the arguments that underpin externalist approaches take various forms, operate within a range of different frameworks, and arise from a number of different sources. One of the distinctive features of a Davidsonian externalism is its close association with a holistic approach to meaning and the mental – a view that takes attitudes and intentional behaviour as always and only arising as part of a dense attitudinal-behavioural network. Indeed, on the approach that will be the focus for my discussion here, externalism and holism turn out to be inseparably intertwined – as mutually articulating and supporting – so much so that one might view each as a mirror of the other. Partly because of its encompassing holism, the Davidsonian approach is also one that rejects any simplistic reduction of the notion of content to any particular form of content, just as it also rejects any reduction of reason, discourse, or language to any one of their particular instantiations. Within the sort of holistic externalism that will be explored here, a certain form of naturalism is inevitable (just as is a certain form of 'materialism'), but it is not a naturalism that identical with scientism, and neither does it limit the descriptive vocabularies available to us, insisting instead on the inevitable and irreducible plurality of such vocabularies.[7]

The interconnection between externalist and holistic considerations is most clearly evident in the analysis of basic communicative situations. To be able to communicate with a speaker requires that we be able to understand her, and that means being able to identify her utterances and attribute appropriate content to them. Although communication is not restricted to matters that are publicly accessible, communication operates through publicly accessible behaviour – both linguistic and non-linguistic. Linguistic behaviour plays an especially important role here, since linguistic behaviour always has a communicative orientation. We speak in order to communicate, even if we also speak in order to do other things as well, and even if sometimes we are ourselves our own communicative partner. In its communicative function, linguistic behaviour is also geared towards the communication of specific content in a way that non-linguistic behaviour usually is not. There is, moreover, a direct connection between linguistic behaviour and mental life: what our utterances express are the mental states or events that also give rise to them. Sometimes this connection may be taken to be so close that the uttering of a sentence and the thought that it expresses appear to coincide – I think something at the same time as I say it, and the thinking is thus identical with the saying.

What we say is thus the *best* guide to what we think – to what we believe, desire, hope and so on – and, in conjunction with our actions more generally, it is the *only* means we have to understand the thoughts of others

(while also playing an important role in our own self-understanding). This is not to deny the possibility that we can be mistaken or deceived, but it is to insist that both the lie and the error can only operate against a background of honest and largely true utterance, and that the lie itself can only be understood as a lie through understanding the truth that it purports to present. Here, in the inter-relation between utterance, behaviour, and attitude, as well as between utterances, attitudes, and behaviour taken on their own, the holistic character of mental life, and of the content that belongs to it, is clearly evident. It is, moreover, not a holism that pertains merely to the *understanding* of mental life, as if holism were a purely epistemological or methodological requirement, but to mental life *itself*. The holistic interconnection that obtains between utterances, attitudes, and behaviour, is a function both of the rational interconnection that obtains as a result of the generic character of attitudes and actions (attitudes are partly differentiated by the way they stand to one another and to action), and of the interconnection that obtains within the structure of content in which attitudes and actions (including linguistic acts) are enmeshed.[8] It thus arises from the very nature of attitudes, utterances, and actions, and is not merely something imposed onto them by the demands of interpretation.[9]

In many ordinary cases of communication, it is easy to misconstrue the underlying structure on which communicative engagement relies. Thus, in those cases in which we rely upon existing habits or linguistic practices

(habits and practices that we often summarize in terms of 'languages'), it is easy to misconstrue the underlying structures that are work. Consider, then, a case in which we cannot rely upon any pre-existing linguistic commonality. How do we identify the content to be attributed to our interlocutor's utterances?

In such a situation, the identification of content is not only a matter of attributing meanings to sentences (or of identifying sentences), but at the same time of identifying the contents of attitudes. This is a direct consequence of the holistic character of attitudes and of content (since attitudes are largely identified by their contents, so the holism of the first is entailed by the holism of the second). Moreover, to encounter someone *as* an interlocutor, that is, as someone with whom we can engage communicatively, is already to have located them in relation to ourselves, and so, necessarily, in relation to an environment, and so a set of entities and events, in relation to which we are also located – an environment that can itself be construed more or less broadly. To say this is not yet to draw upon externalist considerations (although it may give rise to such considerations), but merely to point to the way in which engagement requires some common space within which the engagement can take place. Externalism enters in when we recognise that not only can attitudes and utterances not be pulled away from the larger pattern of attitude and utterance, as well as behaviour, within which they are constituted, but that neither can they be pulled away from the external

environment, and the entities and events in that environment, to which they relate. This is evident from the very structure of communicative engagement. As a result, communication begins where we are able to connect utterances to aspects of that shared environment (as Davidson puts it, "Communication begins where causes converge"[10]), since in so doing we are able to connect utterances to aspects of the environment that are also the objects of our, and our interlocutor's, attitudes.

Describing matters in this latter fashion is already to provide a heavily schematised and summary account of what is a much more complex process. In Davidson, that process is captured in at least two ways. First through the structure of what Davidson refers to as 'radical interpretation' (interpretation that, as in the case sketched above, does not rely on prior linguistic knowledge) in which we are able to identify the attitudes that a speaker's utterances express, and so begin to identify the meanings of those utterances, through assuming that the speaker's utterances are mostly true by our lights – which is to say that the speaker's attitudes, and especially their beliefs, will mostly be in agreement with our own. The second way in which this structure is articulated in Davidson's thinking, and this second way is really a refinement and development of the first, is through the idea of what he calls 'triangulation'.

Triangulation is what is at work in the idea that we can correlate attitudes through connecting utterances to features of a shared environment.

Triangulation involves three lines of connection: (i) between our own attitudes and utterances, and the objects of those attitudes and utterances that are also their causes; (ii) between the attitudes and utterances of our interlocutor, and the causes of their attitudes and utterances that are also their objects; and (iii) between our attitudes and utterances, and the attitudes and utterances of our interlocutor. In cases where the aim is to identify and articulate the third of these lines of connection (where we lack a pre-existing correlation between our attitudes and utterances and those of our interlocutor – where we do not already know what they think and mean), we do so by means of the first two lines of connection. So we establish a correlation between our attitudes and utterances and those of our interlocutor by looking to the correlations between our respective attitudes and utterances and shared features of our environment (moving *from* our attitudes and utterances *to* the objects that are their causes, and *from* the objects that are their causes *to* the attitudes and utterances of our interlocutor).

Properly understood, however, the triangle at issue here is not one in which we 'deduce' or infer one set of connections from the other two, but rather one in which we constantly move between the different sides of the figure in order to refine our articulation of the other sides. This dynamic aspect to communicative engagement and understanding was perhaps clearer in Davidson's earlier accounts of radical interpretation than in his discussions of triangulation, but it is certainly implicit in the idea of triangulation, and

especially in the original practice of triangulation from which the idea is taken. Triangulation is a method identifying relative, not absolute locations, and as such, it always involves the idea of location as determined within a dynamic, rather than static structure. Triangulation, one might say, is an *activity*, and neither an activity that comes to an end nor an activity that allows any final determination of the elements that are articulated within it.

The externalism that emerges here is, it should be noted, not a *simple* externalism in which content is determined *solely* by an external cause or set of causes. In this respect, the broadly Davidsonian conception of the externalist determination of content that I have sketched here is very different from, for instance, the determination of reference on a Kripkean account.[11] One reason for this is that the Davidsonian conception actually draws upon a set of considerations that are very similar to those in opposition to which the Kripkean account was itself developed, namely, considerations relating to so-called "descriptive" theories of reference. Descriptive theories of reference, associated with Wittgenstein among others, take the reference of a term to be determined by the descriptions in which the term figures. Identifying the reference of a term is a matter of identifying that object that best fits the descriptions associated with the term – that maximises the truth of those descriptions. The descriptive theory of reference can thus be viewed as giving priority in the determination of reference to a set of holistic considerations – to considerations concerning the maintenance of consistency and coherence

among those sentences (and so one might say of the attitudes those sentences express) in which referential terms appear. The Kripkean account rejects this approach, taking reference to be determined only by the causal history of the use of a term, with the result that reference and belief may sharply diverge – speakers may turn out to have many false beliefs about the objects to which they are nevertheless able successfully to refer. Reference and belief cannot come apart in the same way on a Davidsonian account, since what we take to be the cause that determines the reference of a term, or that determines the object of a sentence, is itself constrained by other terms and sentences, just as what is to count as the cause, and so the object, of a particular belief is not independent of the other beliefs to which that belief is connected in virtue of its content.

Part of what leads us to overlook the holistic constraints on externalism is the very methodology by which we identify content. Typically, we do not pay attention to the larger semantic, attitudinal or behavioural context in which singular identifications of content or of reference are made, treating those identifications as if they were more or less contextually independent. Of course they are not, and cannot be, since they already occur within a fully constituted semantic, attitudinal and behavioural frame.[12] This is not to say that there is no possibility of terms or sentences referring or beliefs having objects in ways that are inconsistent with the larger networks of sentences and beliefs in which they appear, but only that there will always be limits on how

much inconsistency is possible. Just as deceit is always parasitic upon honest practice, so is inconsistency secondary to consistency.

One might be tempted to say that here an externalist commitment is mitigated by a parallel commitment to holism, except that what may also be said to emerge here is the way holism and externalism actually turn out to merge into one another. One way of understanding externalism is that it involves a conception of content as arising only on the basis of the prior causal embeddedness of speakers or agents in the world. On such a construal, externalism is itself a form of holism that rejects any understanding of content, or of intentionality or mentality, as independent of a larger worldly content. Moreover, consideration of the necessary interconnectedness of content, and of attitudes, utterances, and behaviour, might itself be said to underpin such an externalism, since the interdependence that is at issue here is an interdependence that encompasses the content, both general and specific, at work in externalism itself. Consequently, the constraints of holism operate with respect to the very content we attach to the notions of cause and externality on which externalism draws. As we saw above, the identification of some entity or event as the cause of an attitude or utterance, and so as that which the attitude or utterance is about, is itself dependent on other attitudes we hold and other utterances that we hold true.

The connection between holistic and externalist considerations might be thought to be to some extent captured in Davidson's work, in particular, in

the slogan that "coherence yields correspondence." Yet this slogan, which Davidson himself abandoned,[13] places too much emphasis on coherence as that which gives rise to correspondence, whereas not only is coherence empty when taken on its own, but what might to be thought the analogues to coherence and correspondence, namely holistic and externalist considerations, operate in an en essential interplay. One might argue, in fact, that the very contrast between holism and externalism, like the contrast between coherence and correspondence, is somewhat misleading. If we take the demands of holism seriously, then we cannot even begin with any idea of attitudes, utterances, and certainly not behaviour, as already standing somehow apart from the world to which they refer, and in which they are also causally embedded. There are not first attitudes and utterances on the one side and a world to which they must be connected on the other. This is partly why it can be useful to treat holism as itself implying and encompassing externalism – holism asserts the necessary conectedness, not just of attitudes with other attitudes, or of attitudes with utterances and behaviour, but of speakers with the world in which they are located. Holism is thus not merely a form of coherentism, and neither is externalism to be identified with correspondence.[14]

What is really at issue in the holistic externalism that I have been sketching here is thus a way of thinking about content, and also a way of thinking about what we are as speakers and agents, that rejects the idea of the

realm of the mental as a realm of discrete private entities that stand apart from one another or apart from the public world of other persons and other things. Instead the realm of the mental, the realm of the rational and the intentional, is a realm that is essentially public (which is not to say that is *only* public), that is given in the materiality of what lies around (which is not to say that it is *only* material), and that is also fundamentally based in the causal interactions between bodies (which is not to say that it is *only* causal interaction). Moreover, although this position is one that can be referred to as 'externalist', as well as holist, it is also evident that to talk of externalism here is a little odd, since in a certain sense what occurs is not a shift to the external over the internal, but rather a relocation in the way we think of content, and so the way we think of speakers and agents, that places content *in* the world, rather than in opposition to it, but that therefore no longer treats the world as that which somehow stands 'outside' or apart from content – so that content is something projected from the interiority of the mental into the exteriority of the world.[15] If content is not a matter of what is 'internal' then neither is the world a matter of what is 'external'. The very dichotomy between internality and externality turns out to be a secondary one – we may still talk about the 'internality' of experience or the 'externality' of objects, but such talk has to be understood as always founded in our prior engagement in the world, an engagement that is both rational *and* causal. It is this general position that I have elsewhere referred to as a form of philosophical 'topography' – a

position that combines both holistic and 'externalist' considerations around the single idea of place as that in and through which content is itself determined, and subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and objectivity are jointly articulated.[16]

In Davidson, the holistic interconnection at issue here is elaborated in one way through his presentation of the structure of triangulation as not only underpinning the possibility of content, but also of knowledge. So what we know about ourselves is dependent on what we know about others and about the world; what we know about others depends on what we know about ourselves and about the world; what we know about the world depends on what we know about others and about ourselves. If knowledge is implicated in this same holistic externalism (although whether we should still call it externalism is perhaps a moot point), so too are the concepts of truth and objectivity, although the way they are implicated is not through being somehow holistically determined, but instead through the way this holistic structure itself requires a robust notion of objective truth.

It is at this point that I want to draw the discussion more directly in to the philosophy of history, and beginning with the issue of truth, to explore the way in which this holistic externalist conception of content, and not just of content, but of the world and our relation to it, may give rise to a distinctive (although not unprecedented) way of thinking about history and the historical. As will become evident, not only does this account imply that truth

has to be thought in a way that is a little different from that which is usually assumed, but it also brings with it certain important consequences for the understanding of the relation between content and narrative, and between memory and the materiality of things. On the holistic externalist approach set out here, not only must historical discourse, as with all forms of discourse, take truth as an absolutely central concept, but the notions of narrative that themselves have such a key role in historical discourse also turn out to be embedded within the very structure of a holistic externalist conception of content. Moreover, since, on this account, content is also worked out only in relation to the dynamic engagement of agents and speakers with the materiality of their environment, so too must historical discourse be understood as having a similarly dynamic and dialogic character, worked out within the materiality of its context. History itself can then be understood as given in the holistic externality of language, of narrative, of memory, and of content.

3. From Language to History

There is a widespread tendency within contemporary historical discourse to treat the concept of truth as, in various ways, a secondary or even dispensable notion – although I suspect that this is less widespread among practicing historians than among theorists of history (thus even Simon Schama, in

commenting on the 'fictional' character of his work on the deaths of General Wolfe and Francis Parkman in *Dead Certainties*, warns the reader that "this is not to say... that I scorn the boundary between fact and fiction. It is merely to imply that even in the most austere scholarly report from the archives, the inventive faculty…is in full play"[17]). Part of what underlies the somewhat dismissive attitude to truth in much contemporary philosophy of history is undoubtedly the tendency to assume a way of thinking about truth that ties it to the particular practices and conventions of the natural sciences. Not only does this imply that the criteria of what is true are to be identified with the criteria deployed by the natural sciences in processes of empirical confirmation or disconfirmation, but that truth itself comes to be seen as essentially tied to a certain form of fact-stating discourse concerning what can be empirically verified. If one is sceptical about the universalist pretensions of such 'scientific' discourse or about the possible of its empirical verifiability, then one will also be sceptical about the possibility of the truth that supposedly attaches to it; and even if one is not sceptical in this way, one might still take such discourse to be only a rather narrow form of discourse (and perhaps not even the most interesting form at that).

One might ask, from the very start, why one should give away the concept of truth in the way that is suggested here – why assume such a narrow understanding of what truth might be or of the extent of its relevance? Such a question is surely all the more pressing given the way in which

questions of historical truth loom so large, not only in discussions of policy and decision that look to past experience as the basis for present and future action, but more importantly, perhaps, in the way the past figures in the present in the formation of both individual and collective memory and identity, in the orientation of a society and polity, in the negotiation and adjudication of conflict, and the response to injustice (it is no accident that practices of reconciliation and restorative justice make central use of the notion of truth as a prerequisite to the reconstitution of community). If we look to the holistic externalism set out above, however, it soon becomes clear that truth can neither be given up nor can it be given over to the sort of narrow conception to which it is often consigned. Truth turns out to play a central role within such a holistic externalist framework, although the way truth has to be understood within that framework is very different from that which is often assumed with the discussions that prevail in contemporary history and philosophy of history.

Truth operates both in relation to the externalist and holistic sides of the account set out above. The interconnection between attitudes, utterances and actions, and between the elements of each of these, essentially implicates a concept of truth. It is the concept of holding true that is central to belief and assertion (and there can be no notion of holding *true* without a concept of *truth*. It is truth that underpins notions of consistency and entailment (even understood informally), and so underpins the holistic interconnection that

makes for the possibility of content. It is through the way beliefs and utterances involve claims *to truth* that beliefs and utterances connect to the entities and events they are about (in this respect, truth can be seen as more fundamental than reference – the latter depending, as I argued above, on the holding true of a set of both causal and rational connections).[18]

Within this holistic externalism, truth operates as a property of individual sentences, since it is sentences, or at least sentences as uttered, that stand in causal relations to the entities and events that are their objects, and that also connect to those entities and events through making claims about them.[19] This has, as one immediate consequence, namely that truth has to be understood, in one important respect, as contingent – if truth is the truth of sentences, then truth will be contingent on both what the sentence says, and so on language, as well as on the way the world is.[20] Davidson puts this point regarding the contingency of truth by saying that "Nothing in the world, no object or event, would be true or false if there were not thinking creatures".[21] Truth is thus dependent on the existence of creatures like us, and it is so dependent because of the way truth belongs to sentences, and because of the way sentences themselves depend, not merely on language, but on a larger structure of utterance, of attitude, of action. Truth, then, is not eternal, since the sentences to which truth attaches, and the speakers that utter those sentences, are not eternal. This does not, however, undermine the objectivity of truth, nor does it license any form of relativism. Sentences make claims on

truth, and whether a sentence is true is dependent on nothing more than the nature of the claim and the nature of that which is the object of the claim.

There are no eternal truths, just as there are no eternal sentences. Even scientific truths, which also always take the form of *sentences* that are true, will be contingent in this way. We may be tempted to argue that such contingency seems not to do justice to the way in which the way the world is surely remains the same independently of language – independently of our speaking, thinking, acting – but this is to forget the fact that when we speak of truth, we are not speaking of some feature or property of the world understood apart from language, or apart from creatures like ourselves. The confusion between truth as belonging to sentences and truth as somehow belonging to the world is a confusion akin to that which arises when we conflate what *is said* with what it is said *about*. Truth belongs to what is said, to sentences, but it does not belong to what those sentences are about, and this is so even though *what* a sentence is said *about* does have a bearing on whether *the sentence* is true.

Yet if truth is indeed a property of individual sentences, determined by the way sentences engage with the world, truth nevertheless also figures as part of the background against which individual sentences can be true or false, and in this latter respect, truth, or at least the commitment to truth, also goes beyond what is given in any sentence or set of sentences. This is clearly evident in the Davidsonian structure of triangulation (and before that, of

radical interpretation) in which the determination of the meaning of a particular utterance is based on the way in which the speaker is located in relation, not to only to her other utterances, and her attitudes and behaviour, but also in relation to the larger framework that encompasses not only her environmental circumstances, as well as the utterances, and so also the attitudes and behaviour, of her interlocutor. The way in which we gain access to this complex structure depends essentially on the notion of truth, since it is by means of true sentences that this structure is represented, that elements within the structure are identified and given content, and it is also by means of the relations between sentences, in which truth plays a central role, that the structure is constituted *as* a structure (even though a dynamic and shifting one). One way of capturing this point is by saying that the very possibility of any sentence being true depends on many other sentences being true (and not merely being *held true*, since the distinction between *being* true and *being held* true is itself a distinction that, inasmuch as it is a meaningful or contentful distinction, already presupposes its location within a larger body of true sentences). We might that this is exactly analogous to the way in which, for one sentence to have content is for many sentences to have content. What is added by the explicit focus on truth, however, is the idea that the content at issue is not merely a content that can be construed purely 'internally', aside from speakers' engagement in the world, but is already a content that

implicates the world – just as truth, while belonging to sentences, nevertheless also implicates the world about which our sentences speak.

The character of truth as both a property of individual sentences and yet also as inhering in the background against which any individual sentence can be true (or false) captures both the externalist and holistic elements of the account that I have been sketching. We might say that they evoke elements of both correspondence and coherence, but only so long as we do not take these terms to refer us back to the usual philosophical theories of truth with which they are typically associated. Neither of those theories can do justice to the centrality and complexity of truth nor, indeed, to its simplicity. There are moreover a number of consequences that follow from this holistic-externalist understanding of truth. Not only does truth have to be understood as belonging to sentences, rather than to ideal entities such as propositions, not only does it have to be understood as already presupposed as part of the background to the very possibility of content (and so to the possibility of thought, of attitude, of action), but truth also turns out to be *contingent* (because, as we have seen, it cannot be extricated from the human context in which it arises) and *objective* (because truth cannot be extricated either, from the way sentences relate to their objects), and it is also essentially *plural*.

Since truth as it belongs to individual sentences always arises with respect to specific contexts within which speakers, and so also utterances, attitudes, and actions, are located, so we cannot make sense of the idea of

there being a single body of sentences that encompasses all and only those sentences that are true. Such an idea is as nonsensical a notion as the idea of truth as belonging to ideal propositions. Truth cannot be reified in terms of something that constitutes a single 'Truth', but is always instantiated in terms of a plurality of truths – even if many such truths are often so mundane and ordinary that we fail even to notice their character *as* truths. If there is one true sentence, then there must be many true sentences, and this does not only follow from the way individual sentences stand against a larger background of true sentences, as the necessary presupposition of its having content, but also from the way in which any single true sentence can itself be understand as potentially giving rise to, and being implied by, many other such sentences. Sentences do not come singly, and neither do truths. Moreover, since there is no limit that can be placed on the possible sentences that can be uttered, neither is there any limit on the possible truths that can be uttered either. The plurality of truth mirrors, not only the productivity of language, but also the plurality of the world. In this latter respect, the plurality of truth does not contradict the objectivity of truth but, in some respects, can be said to follow from it. The world is itself characterised by a plurality of entities and events, and by a plurality of possible modes of description of those entities and events. Objectivity does not depend upon being able to arrive at a single description of the world, but in being able to adjust one's descriptions in the

light of entities and events as they present themselves – an adjustment that is constant and ongoing.[22]

For the historian, recognition of the contingency, plurality and objectivity of truth, and together with that, recognition of the way in which truth arises on the basis of both what is said *and* how things are, ought to prompt a mode of historical practice that is attentive to the complexity of truth, and its sensitivity to both linguistic and extra-linguistic considerations. It ought to prompt historians to be attentive to the way in which subtle shifts in language may alter judgment and decision, both of the historical agents who are the focus of historical study, and of historians themselves. It should also lead historians to recognise that what counts as true is not *simply* a matter to be determined by reference to 'the facts' (on this account there are no genuine 'facts' that stand apart from and in contrast to sentences), but must always involve an engagement with language, and so also with the discursive context in which language, and linguistic practice, arises (which is why, as Schama notes in the comment I quoted above, there is no 'objective' reportage that is not also 'inventive'). It should also lead historians to recognise the plurality of possible historical accounts, without withdrawing from acknowledging their potential objectivity.

If truth has been one of the issues that has prompted considerable debate and discussion in recent philosophy of history, narrative is another. Indeed, one of the most important developments in philosophy of history, a

development that can be seen as having its origins, in part, in the dispute over historical explanation that arise in the 1960s, has surely been the rise of a conception of history as giving a central role to narrative.[23] Already it should be evident that the holistic externalism developed here will not be averse to such narrativist conceptions, in part because of its thoroughly holistic understanding of content. For the most part narrative accounts already depend upon or derive from such holistic conceptions inasmuch as they see content and meaning as based in the drawing together of elements within a narrative frame. Yet narrative accounts, taken on their own, can easily be seen as operating within an internalist or subjectivist conception – narrative, after all, is surely the product of a narrator, and not something to be found 'in' the events narrated. Louis Mink famously commented that 'stories are not lived but told'[24] – the implication being that narrative is to be understood, not as something *given in* events, but as instead *imposed onto* them.

As soon as one adopts an externalist perspective of the sort outlined here, however, such a view becomes difficult to sustain. While narrative accounts can indeed be seen to derive from a certain holistic approach to content, such holism, when allied with externalism, cannot be understood as applying *only* to the mode in which things are given – by which they are known or interpreted – but is itself tied up with the very determination of things, including events, as meaningful and contentful.[25] Thus, inasmuch as a life is given shape and meaning through the way in which the elements of

that life are brought together (elements that are themselves given shape and meaning through the way they are brought together with one another), and inasmuch as such a bringing together of elements is achieved in and through the structure of narrative, so it cannot be the case that lives are lived independently of also being told or narrated.[26] Lives are told just to the extent that it is in their telling that they become lives.

In its most basic form, narrative is the connecting of events (where an event may be the making of a decision, the performance of an action, or some more complex happening that may supervene on these and other events besides) in a way that enables those events to be understood as rationally connected with one another. The simplest form of narrative is the action explanation in which something done is exhibited as making sense, which is to say, is exhibited as having a certain content or meaning, in virtue of the way it fits into a larger story about the attitudes, and perhaps also the actions, of the agent (a story that will always depend upon a much larger background than is ever made explicit). Narration is simply the mode by which we exhibit the rational connectedness of individual actions and decisions, as well as the causal connectedness of individual events, in a way that does not rely on the specification of the generic laws, causal or otherwise, under which those events may fall.[27] Since content or meaning arises on the basis of such rational connectedness, so narration turns out to be the means by which content or meaning is articulated and formed.

This does not imply, however, that such narration is always made explicit nor that it be recognised as narration. When we explain our own or another's actions by setting out the background to that action – by specifying the attitudes and other actions, and the environmental circumstances, broadly conceived, to which it relates – what we do is to supply a narrative context within which the action fits. The way we do this may take many different forms depending on how much of the context needs to be made explicit and so the way we do it may vary from the very simple to the complex – it is also the case that one event may well fall under different narrative accounts depending on how the event is described.[28] We do not, however, need to identify any particular narrative account offered as a narrative, as instantiating a particular mode of narrative, or as employing any particular mode of 'emplotment', in order for it to be a narrative.

The role of narrative as the basic form in which rational connection between individual events is typically shaped and exhibited is something obscured by a tendency, particularly among narrativists such as White and others, to treat narrative as tied to particular literary formations, including modes of figurative discourse. In so doing, the narrativist approach in history is one that generally looks to narrative as *one* way of engaging with the world among others (one that involves a particular *literary* mode of engagement), rather than having the ontologically determinative character that I have indicated here. One can, of course, employ the concept of narrative to refer

only to certain developed forms of narration or of narrative practice. To argue that this is the *only* proper sense that can be given to narrative, however, would not only be a difficult claim to sustain, but it would also give rise to a notion of narrative severed from what might otherwise be considered the underlying structure of narrative as it operates in the holistic formation of content and meaning[29]

In fact, within discussions of narrative in the philosophy of history, there often seems an ambiguity in exactly how narrative is to be understood – an ambiguity between, on the one hand, narrative as indeed tied to particular literary forms, and so as existing within the frame of the literary alone, and, on the other hand, narrative as a basic 'way of seeing' that gives form and shape to what is seen. Part of the problem here is that, in making use of the concept of narrative, many narrative theorist do indeed begin with a specifically *literary* conception of narrative which is then taken to have a more basic ontological or epistemological function (although often in a way that remains implicit). But if narrative is to have such a basic role, as indeed the holistic externalist considerations here might suggest, then the literary formation of narrative has to be seen, not as constituting the underlying structure of narrative, but rather as itself a particular formation of that more basic structure.

When narrative is indeed understood from the perspective of holism set within an externalist frame, then narrative can also be seen as providing

the essential means by which to articulate the interconnection of attitude and action with its larger environmental setting. Narration is the only means by which to make sense of individual events aside from their inclusion within a causal-nomological frame, *and* in a way that encompasses agents and their actions, along with other entities and other events. One of the most basic forms of narrative is given in the form of the journey (something reflected in the fact that, historically, one of the earliest narrative forms, the precursor to the novel, is the travel story – of which Homer's Odyssey is undoubtedly the most famous western version), and it is the journey, the movement within and between places, that represents one of the most basic modes of our engagement with the world. It is as a result of our movement within and between places, as well as the movement of what is around us, that we come into different *relations* with things, and into relations with different *things*.[30] If we think of agency in terms of movement within an environment, then the idea of narrative proves to be essential as the means by which we keep track of such movement in a way that also takes account of the content associated with it. Narrative is thus not a matter of the conjoining of a series of temporal instances alone, but always involves different a conjoining of things within and in relation to a spatial frame. Narration is thus a temporal-spatial connecting that reflects the temporal-spatial connectedness through which agents are defined in relation to their surrounding world, and through which their understanding of that world is given definition and shape.

The importance that accrues to narrative once we take seriously the holistic externalist nature of content suggests that the centrality of narrative in historical practice is not merely a feature of history alone. But more significantly, perhaps, it also suggest that history has itself to be understood as always encompassing more than just a particular mode of scholarly inquiry alone. Not only does history refer to the inquiry into the past, as well as to the past into which that inquiry is undertaken, but history also refers to the explicit formation of narratives within historical inquiry and to the often implicit, and always multiple, narrations that figure in the very formation of the self, both individually and collectively (the two being themselves interconnected). In this way, memory and history cannot be set wholly apart from one another. Not only do both operate in relation to frames of narration and self-narration, but memory itself draws upon the historical as part of the frame within which it forms its own narratives, while the historical is in turn shaped from within frames that are determined by memory. Moreover, both also have to be understood as given, not in terms of some realm of pure interiority, but in the very *materiality* that surrounds us – in the events and entities with which we are already entangled and engaged.

Within contemporary historical writing, the materiality of memory has itself become a significant theme, and in many ways it appears to converge with the account I have developed here. Pierre Nora's *Lieux de Mémoire* (appearing in English as *Realms of Memory*) is a frequently cited source in this

regard, but Nora's work also exhibits some important points of divergence from my account. In an essay on *les lieux de mémoire*, Nora has talked of how the turn to *lieux* within French historiography arises as a result of a loss of the *milieux* of memory.[31] There is no longer the shared sense of a past as given in collective memory, in forms of practice and ritual, and so we need to look at the way that past is given in the materialities that nevertheless remain – materialities that take many different forms including the archive as well the monument.[32] Yet not only does Nora rely upon a dubious distinction between history and memory themselves in elaborating upon this idea, but it was never the case that memory was other than embedded in and formed in relation to the *materiality* of things – to the concrete circumstances, and so also the concrete sites, in which the lives and identities of individuals and communities are shaped. If there has been a loss of the *milieux* of memory, then that simply means that we can no longer take certain habitual forms of memory for granted, and that we must therefore look more closely at the real foundations of memory, and of identity, as worked out in relation to exteriority and materiality. What we may think of as the materiality of memory that appears here is itself a function of the way in which content, and the very possibility of interiority with it, is formed only in the embedded engagement of agents within a larger world – an embeddedness that is both causal and rational, that requires the spatio-temporal locatedness of agents,

and that includes the engagement with other agents as well as with other entities and events.

4. Externalising History

The holistic externalism that has been sketched here involves a way of thinking about content, about meaning and understanding, and about the structures on which these depend, that should already be thoroughly familiar from the very nature of historical research. Even when it construes its own task in terms of the recovery of some form of historical 'experience' or past mode of 'subjectivity', still historical inquiry can operate only through having access to publicly available documents, artefacts, and other such material evidence of past actions, intentions, and events – through having access to the objective instantiations of the experiential and the 'subjective' no less than of the workings of natural process. The past is given only in and through such 'materialized' forms of meaning, and in this respect, historical inquiry has itself always proceeded on the basis of an essentially 'externalist' premise. Moreover, in its implicit assumption of such externalism, it also assumes a certain holistic character to the meaning that is so concretely given, since it is partly in virtue of the way in which attitudes, and attitudes and actions are themselves essentially connected, not only with the objects that are their

causes, but with one another, that it is possible to gain access to the structure of mental life by means of the material traces it leaves behind.

The account offered here, while drawing on ideas developed largely within a certain philosophy of language, is nevertheless not an account that results in drawing history back into a purely linguistic frame,[33] but precisely the opposite: it returns history to the world and to engagement with the world (or perhaps it returns the *philosophy* of history to the world, since it is not clear that history, in its actual practice, was ever removed from the world in the first place). In this respect, it may achieve something of what Frank Ankersmit seems to ask for when he urges us "to throw open the windows of this narrow and stuffy room that we have been living in…and let us breathe again the fresh air of the outside world!"[34] Yet if it does achieve this, it does not do so by setting language to one side in favour of a notion of experience (nor to by disconnecting experience from truth), but rather by recognising the character of language and world as already bound together in a way that allows the linguistic and the experiential to be understood as each opening to the rather than shutting one another off, as each enabled in relation to the other, as each always and already implicating the other.

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[1] *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p.407.

[2] See Hilary Putnam, 'The Meaning of "Meaning"', in *Philosophical Papers, Vol. II : Mind, Language, and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), and Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972).

[3] See Burge, 'Individualism and the Mental', in P.A. French, T.E. Uehling, and H.A. Wettstein (eds.) *Midwest Studies in Philosophy IV* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), pp. 73-121.

[4] Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p.151.

[5] Indeed, it is surprising how very little engagement there has been. Thus Richard T. Vann's instructive account of the development of the debate over narrativist accounts of history within the pages of *History and Theory* during the 'sixties and 'seventies is striking for the almost complete absence from the debate of any considerations from the philosophy of language – even though this was a period during which philosophy of language was increasingly come to the fore as a central areas of philosophical inquiry (see Vann, 'Turning Linguistic: History and Theory and *History and Theory*, 1960-1975', in Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (eds), *A New Philosophy of History*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995, pp.70-87). What Vann characterises as a turn to language appears, from the perspective of the philosophy of language, as completely untouched by any linguistic turn of the sort that, for instance, Rorty famously thematized (in *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*, edited by Richard M. Rorty, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1967) – what Vann identifies seems actually to be a turn to the literary, and only thus does it encompass a turn to the linguistic.

[6] Evident in the work of a range of authors, including: David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf , 1995); and Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996–98 – Nora's work is an abridged version of the 7-volume *Lieux de mémoire* published between 1981 and 1992). I take Nora as an explicit focus for some of my discussion in relation to the materiality of memory below, see §3 below.

[7] It is a naturalism that consists simply in an insistence that the world is to be understood without reference to any entities or processes that go *beyond* the natural – that is, that go beyond the ordinary entities and processes that we see around us. The materialism that is at issue is not a reductive materialism, but rather a materialism of the sort exemplified by Davidson's own anomalous monism – a materialism that holds to the materiality of the entities and processes, but rejects the idea that the only descriptions of those entities and processes are material descriptions.

[8] One might be tempted to argue that the interconnection at issue here is mitigated by the fact that, at least on a Davidsonian account, reasons can be causes – that is, attitudes can stand in causal relation to other attitudes and to behaviour. In that case, the identity of attitudes ought to supervene on the identity of the material states, and since the identity of material states is not holistically constrained (or at least not in the same way), the identity of the mental states that supervene upon them cannot be so constrained either. Such an argument assumes what it is intended to show, however, since it assumes that the supervenience relation obtains between states taken individually and their relevant material states. Supervenience is perhaps better understood, and certainly may be understood, as a relation that obtains only between networks of mental states and corresponding networks of material states. The way holistic considerations relate to questions of supervenience here can be seen to parallel the way they also connect with issues concerning the causal determination of reference discussed below.

[9] The claim at issue here is thus not merely stipulative, since the holistic interconnection that appears here is a feature of the way attitudes, behaviour, and utterance present themselves. One may well argue that the way they present need not be how they are, but in the absence of any evidence to support such an idea, it remains a completely empty 'speculation' in the worst sense (like the idea that there could be immaterial, undetectable phantoms present around us all the time). That things *need not* be how they appear is not a reason to suppose that they *are not* how they appear, and in the absence of any contrary evidence, the fact that things *appear* in a certain way is *prima facie* evidence that they *are* that way.

[10] Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', p.151.

[11] See ibid, p.151 n.7.

[12] This has an important consequence for discussions of certain sceptical scenarios – the most recent version of which is that portrayed in the film *The Matrix* – that present the possibility of a brain being held in a totally artificial environment, cut off from the usual world in which we live, and yet fed stimulations that simulate the ordinary experience of that world. Whether such an scenario can be made even initially plausible is not completely clear (the filmic presentation over-rides such difficulties), but on the account offered here one cannot simply interpret the attitudes and experiences of such a brain by reference only to the causes of the stimulations that are fed to the brain (so that the objects of the brain's attitudes are those causes) nor can one unequivocally say that the brains' attitudes and experiences are to be interpreted as having the same content as would be attributed if it were causally involved with the world in the usual way. As a result, such scenarios turn out to be completely unhelpful as a means either of exploring the idea of scepticism (although they may indicate something of the opacity that also attaches to scepticism itself) or of elucidating the nature of content. They cannot be taken to over-ride the general presupposition that, in general, content requires truth.

[13] 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge – Afterthoughts' , p.154

[14] The holistic externalism that I have set out here is heavily indebted to the work of Davidson, but it is worth noting that in its general form it can also be seen as mirroring aspects of the hermeneutic approach to understanding found in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. While the language of externalism and mental content appears as somewhat alien to the philosophical milieu in which Gadamer's work has developed (as is indicated by Gadamer's response to Björn Ramberg's essay, 'The Source of the Subjective', in Lewis Edwin Hahn (ed), *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Library of Living Philosophers 24, Chicago: Open Court, 1999, p.472-474), this does not mean that there are not significant underlying connections here. Thus Gadamer's emphasis on the way understanding operates through the engagement between interlocutors in relation

to some common subject matter suggests a similar triangular relation, in Gadamer's case operative primarily in relation to texts rather than spoken utterance, to that which is evident in the Davidsonian account sketched here. Whatever the other differences between a Gadamerian and Davidsonian account, what they share is an essentially holistic and relational conception of understanding, one that is well captured in Gadamer's notion of *Gespräch* (conversation or dialogue), together with a view of understanding as always determined by the object or subject matter to which understanding is directed. While Gadamer does not take this way of thinking in the direction of an explicit externalism (it is hard to see how he could do so given that the language of externalism is so much tied to a set of specifically analytic philosophical concerns), his thinking can be seen already to operate within a framework in which the separation of thought from world, of subject from object, is no longer seen to be ontologically primitive (part of Gadamer's inheritance from Heidegger), and it is precisely this separation that externalism of a Davidsonian variety also contests and refuses. For more on the connection between Davidson and Gadamer see, for instance, my discussion in 'Gadamer and Davidson on the Ground of Understanding', in Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnswald and Jens Kertscher (eds), *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), pp.195-216.

[15] Such a view of content, and of the mental, as based in the private and the interior is the main target of Davidson's widely misunderstood essay 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd rev. edn, 2001). The argument at issue is one he both clarifies and expands in 'The Myth of the Subjective', *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, pp.39-52 – see also my own discussion in 'What is Common to All: Davidson on Agreement and Understanding', in Jeff Malpas (ed.), *Dialogues with Davidson: Acting, Interpreting, Understanding* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, forthcoming, 2011).

[16] See especially Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[17] Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (London: Granta, 1991), p.322.

[18] The formal definition of truth within a Tarskian truth theory may draw on a notion of reference in the form of the satisfaction relation, but this reflects only the nature of the formal apparatus required for the definition of the applicability of the truth predicate, and cannot be taken as demonstrating anything about the roles of, or relations between, truth and reference more generally.

[19] This does not mean, it should be noted, that truth can therefore not apply to those concatenations of sentences that make up stories or narratives. Not only will the truth of a narrative or story be partly dependent on the truth of the individual claims that are part of it, but the narrative or story also presents a particular way of reading events that may itself be true or false. In this respect, however, the truth or falsity of a narrative taken as a whole need not attach to any specific sentence that forms a part of the narrative (although it may do so), but rather attaches to sentences that themselves assert that truth. So, for instance, when we consider A.J.P. Taylor's account, in *The Origins of the Second World War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), of the events leading up to the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939, and ask whether it provides an accurate narrative of the events at issue, then what is at stake is the truth of sentences like the following: "A.J.P. Taylor's account of the events leading up to the outbreak of war in 1939, as set out in his *The Origins of the Second World War*, provides an accurate account of those events", which is not a sentence that itself appears in Taylor's account. Of course, whether a sentence like this is true or false will depend on how we understand the claim the sentence is taken to make, and what we take to be the criteria of correctness as they may apply to a complex narrative such as Taylor's. There are, however, no absolute criteria than can be applied here – whether we come to decide that the account is accurate will depend, as one might expect given the holistic approach I have set out, on the broader context in which the question of accuracy arises.

[20] Notice that inasmuch as the truth of a sentence is indeed a matter of the relation between the sentence and the world (between what is said and how things are) so truth always involves *some* notion of correspondence – see Davidson, 'A

Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', p.139. The notion of correspondence at issue here provides, however, no independent way of characterizing truth.

[21] Davidson, *Truth and Predication* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2005), p.7.

[22] There are of course, different levels of description, and so different ways in which the adjustment at issue here is played out. Moreover, while some levels of descriptions may be prone to less adjustment than others, none are exempt from such adjustment, if only because every description is sensitive to changes in language.

[23] It is one aspect of this development that is the focus for Robert T. Vann's 'Turning Linguistic: History and Theory and *History and Theory*, 1960-1975'.

[24] Louis Mink, 'History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension', *New Literary History*, 1 (1970), pp.557. Hayden White repeats the remark with a slightly different emphasis but to the same effect: 'Lives are lived and stories are told' – 'The historical text as literary artefact', in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1978), p.90

[25] See again the comments in note 5 above.

[26] Just as there are different levels of descriptions of events, so there are different levels of descriptions of a life or of the parts of a life. It may be argued that White has in mind only a certain high level of description, and that this does not touch the sort of holistic interconnection that is needed for individual attitudes, utterances or actions to have content. However, the connections that make for content at the level of individual attitudes will also be relevant to the connections that make for content at the level of any more general description, while descriptions at a more general level may well have some relevance to descriptions that operate more locally. In fact, given a holistic approach to content, there can be no way to determine, in advance, how different attitudes, utterances or actions, or different levels of description, might connect with one another or which might be relevant in what ways.

[27] Which is not to say that there may not be such laws underlying the connections at issue, but only that the adequacy of the narration does not rely on the

specification of those laws – this is, of course, a familiar Davidsonian point . Whether there are any relevant 'laws' that are not also causal laws is a moot point. I do not think that the requirements of rationality give rise to 'laws' that are in any way relevantly analogous to causal laws, since the requirements of rationality are not capable of being applied, at least not in the sense at issue here, in any precise or determinate fashion. Rationality requires the existence of reasons, but what can count as a reason in any specific case cannot be readily specified in advance; similarly rationality requires a degree of consistency of reasons, but what counts as consistent cannot be given any unique determination.

[28] I see no reason to take the notion of an event as somehow belonging to a purely physicalist vocabulary that thereby sets it aside from the language of narration. Events are amenable to various modes of description (Just as, on a Davidsonian account, events can be described using either a physical or a mental vocabulary). One can also speak about the same event falling under different descriptions without needing to specify a single criterion of identity for events according to which they count as the same. If events are always given under a description, and so within a particular descriptive vocabulary, then so too are the criteria of identity for events.

[29] One might also add that narrativist accounts that treat narrative as providing the interpretive framework within which events are given a certain content or meaning can be seen to operate analogously to the way conceptual schemes are supposed to operate in 'making sense' of experiential content, and thereby to be vulnerable to the same arguments that Davidson deploys against the scheme-content distinction itself (see Davidson, 'On the Very idea of a Conceptual Scheme'). It should be noted that what Davidson attacks is not the trivial idea that we employ different ways of making sense or of interpreting aspects of the world or its empirical presentation, but that the world in general can be understood as something over against language or conceptuality in general. In this respect, the Davidsonian attack on the scheme-content distinction is part of a larger argument for the sort of holistic externalism set out here.

[30] A point evident in, among other places, phenomenological discussions of space – see, for instance, Edmund Husserl's treatment of space and perception in *Thing and Space*, trans. Richard Dojcewicz (Dordecht: Kluwer, 1997).

[31] See Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', *Representations* 26 (1989), pp.7-9.

[32] The French *lieu* cannot be taken straightforwardly to be identical with the English 'place', having none of the emotional or experiential connotations that are often associated with the English term.

[33] See Davidson's comments in 'Seeing Through Language', *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp.127-142.

[34] Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p.106.