In Dialogue With the Past

Reflections on a Metaphor

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Introduction

Once upon a time, it was not uncommon for historians to describe their engagement with relics from the past – medieval charters unearthed in a badly lit archive, or hand-written letters barely rescued from the moist of a smelly town hall cellar – in truly anthropomorphic terms. No one less than Leopold von Ranke, for instance, wrote the Countess of Arnim in 1828 that amidst his medieval source material in Italy, he met “many princesses, possibly beautiful, all under a curse and needing to be saved.” In almost erotic language, he referred to “virgins” and “objects of love” in Italian archives, whom he longed to meet in the hope of producing “a beautiful Roman-German prodigy.” In equally anthropomorphic terms, the French historian Jules Michelet expressed his desire to bring the past to life again. Surrounded by ancient papers and parchments, Michelet addressed these relics as if they were dead bodies waiting for some miraculous resurrection: “Softly my dear friends, let us proceed in order if you please . . . [A]s I breathed their dust, I saw them rise up. They rose from the sepulcher . . . as in the Last Judgment of Michelangelo or in the Dance of Death.”

It is not merely the exalted prose of these romantic historians that makes us, modern philosophers of history, smile. Its epistemological subtext, too, differs significantly from how we have come to understand the historian’s attempt

2 Quoted in Carolyn Steedman, Dust (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 27.
at acquiring knowledge and understanding of the past. Important as sources still are, we do not consider them as “authorities” to whom historians must “listen” in order to learn about the past. Rather, we treat them as “traces” that are valuable to the extent that scholars approach them with relevant questions, hypotheses, and conjectures. What we expect historians to do is not to “listen,” but rather to “examine.” In other words, after a century of “constructivist,” “narrativist,” and “post-foundationalist” philosophy of history, we tend to emphasize not the privileged position of the source, but the intellectual creativity that historical interpretation demands of the historian. Moreover, while both Ranke and Michelet did not hesitate to present their research findings as a true rendering of “the past,” we have been accustomed to distinguish sharply between “history” and “the past,” or between historians’ inferences and a past reality to which nobody – not even a romantic historian armed with resurrection powers – has immediate access.

One wonders to what extent the often-used metaphor of a “dialogue” or “conversation” with the past is bound up with similar epistemological commitments.3 Doesn’t the very notion of a conversation between past and present presuppose that the past is personified into an agent capable of talking, questioning, and listening? Doesn’t the metaphor assume that the past is a conversation partner with a voice of its own, and therefore not in need of spokespersons such as historians in order to make itself heard?4 Doesn’t it presuppose that the past has a recognizable identity, if only in the sense that it can be “picked out” from other objects?5 Furthermore, doesn’t the metaphor of a “dialogue” or “conversation” treat the historian and the past as if the two “were just made for each other”?6 Doesn’t it overlook that historians are engaged in other relationships, too, which deprive their conversations with the past from the sort of intimacy described by Ranke and Michelet? Most importantly, doesn’t the metaphor, all good intentions notwithstanding, ignore something that philosophy of history in recent decades has consistently stressed, namely that historians read their sources from the perspectives of their own tropes, plots, and paradigms?

3 The wide-ranging history of the metaphor is ably traced in Jürgen Pieters, Speaking With the Dead: Explorations in Literature and History (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).