Chapter 1. The Choice of the Historian

The word ‘history’ is very old – so old that men have sometimes grown weary of it. It is true that they have rarely gone so far as to wish to erase it from the vocabulary entirely. Even the sociologists of the Durkheim school make room for it. They do so, to be sure, only in order to relegate it to one poor corner of the sciences of man – a sort of secret dungeon in which, having first reserved for sociology all that appears to them susceptible of rational analysis, they shut up the human facts which they condemn as the most superficial and capricious of all.

Here, on the contrary, we shall preserve the broadest interpretation of the word “history.” The word places no a priori prohibitions in the path of inquiry, which may turn out will toward either the individual or the social, toward momentary conversions or the most lasting developments. It comprises in itself no credo; it commits us, according to its original meaning, to nothing more than “inquiry.” I surely, since its first appearance on the lips of men, more than two millenniums ago, its content has changed a great deal. Such is the fate of all truly living terms in a language. If the sciences were obligated to find a new name each time they made in advance - what a multitude of christenings and what a waste of time for the academic realm!

In remaining quietly loyal to his glorious Hellenic name, our history need be no more like that of Heacataeus Miletus than the physics of Lord Kelvin or Langevin is like that of Aristotle. What, then, is this history of ours?

At the start, while focusing our attention upon the real problems of investigation, it would be pointless to draw up a tedious and inflexible definition. What serious work man has ever burned himself with such articles of faith? It is not only that there are meticulous precision omits the best in every intellectual creation - the half-formed impulse toward a knowledge still undetermined but capable of extension. The worst danger of such careful definitions is is that they only bring forever limitations. “This subject,” declares the Divine Lexicographer, “or that means of treating it, is, no doubt seductive, but – take care, O young apprentice! – It is not history!” Are we then the rules committee of an ancient guild, who codified the task permitted to the members of the trade, and who, with a list once and for all complete, unhesitatingly reserve their exercise to the licensed masters? The physicist and chemists are wiser – so far as I know, they have never been seen to quarrel about the respective rights of physics, of chemistry, a physical chemistry, or (assuming the existence of such term) of chemical physics.

It is no less true, faced with the vast chaos of reality, the historian is necessarily lead to carve out that particular area to which his tools applied; hence, to make a selection – and, obviously, not the same as that of the biologist, for example, but that which is the proper selection of the historian. Here we have an authentic problem of action. It will pursue us throughout our study.
Chapter 2: History and Man

It is sometimes said; “History is the science of the past.” To me, this is badly put.

For, to begin with, the very idea that the past as such can be the object of science is ridiculous. How, without preliminary distillation, can one make a phenomena, having no other common character than that of being not contemporary with us, the matter of rational knowledge? On the reverse side of the medal, can one imagine a complete science of the universe and its present state?

Doubtless, in the origins of historiography, the old analysts were scarcely embarrassed by these scruples. They narrated pell-mell events whose only connection was that they had happened about the same time: eclipse, hail storms, and the sudden appearance of astonishing meteors along with battles and the deaths of kings and heroes. But into these early reminiscences of humanity, as garbled as the observations of the small child, a sustained effort of analysis has gradually introduce the necessary classification. It is true that our language, fundamentally conservative, freely retains the name of history for any study of a change taking place in time. The custom is harmless, for a deceives no one. In that sense, there is a history of the solar system, because the stars which compose it have not always been as we now see them. It belongs to the province of astronomy. There is a history of volcanic eruptions which is, I am sure, of most lively interest as regards the composition of the earth. It is not concern a history of historians.

Or, at least, it does so only in so far as its observations chance to coincide with the specific preoccupations of our history. How, then, is the division of labor determined in practice? To understand this, a single example will be worth more than a thousand words.

In the 10th century AD., a deep gulf, the Zwin, indent the Flemish coast. It was later blocked up with sand. To what department of knowledge does the study of this phenomenon belong? At first sight, anyone would suggest geology. The action of alluvial deposit, the operation of ocean currents, or, perhaps, changes in sea level: was not geology invented and put on earth to deal with just such as these? Of course. But at close range, the matter is not quite so simple. Is there not first a question of investigating the origin of the transformation? Immediately, the geologist is forced to ask questions which are no longer strictly within his jurisdiction. For there is no doubt that the silting of the gulf was at least assisted by dyke construction, changing the direction of the channel, and drainage – all activities of man, founded in collective need and made possible only by a certain social structure. At the other end of the chain there is a new problem: the consequences. At a little distance from the end of the gulf, and communicating with it by a short river passage, rose town. This was Bruges. By the waters of the Zwin it imported or exported the greatest part of the merchandise which made of it, relatively speaking, the London or New York of that day. Then came, every day more apparent, the advance of the sand. At the water receded, Bruges vainly extended its docks and harbor further toward the mouth of the river. Little by little, it’s quays fell asleep. To be sure, this was not the sole cause of its decline. (Does the physical ever affect the social, unless it’s operations have been prepared, abetted, and given
scope by other factors which themselves have already derived from man?). But this was certainly at least one of the most efficacious of the links in the casual chain.

Now, the act of a society remodeling the soil upon which it lives in accordance with its needs is, as anyone recognizes instinctively, and imminently “historical” event. It is the same with the vicissitudes of a powerful seat of trade. Hence, in an example entirely characteristic of the topography of learning, we see, on the one hand, an area of overlap, where the union of two disciplines is shown to be indispensable to any attempt at explanation; on the other, a point of transition, where when a phenomenon has been described with the sole exception that its consequences remain undetermined, it is, in some definitive way, you did up by one discipline to another. What is it that seems to dictate the intervention of history? It is the appearance of the human element.

Long ago, indeed, are great forebears, such as Michelet or Fustel de Coulanges, taught us to recognize that the object of history is, by nature, man. Let us say rather, men. For more than the singular, favoring abstraction, the plural which is the grammatical form of relativity is fitting for the science of change. Behind the features of landscape, behind tools or machinery, behind what appear to be the most formalized written documents, and behind institutions, which seem almost entirely detached from their founders, there are men, and it is men that history seeks to grasp. Failing that, it will be at best but an exercise in erudition. The good historian is like the giant of the fairytale. He knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies.

From the character of history as the knowledge of men derives its particular situation as regards the problem of expression. It is “science“ or “art“? About 1800, our great-grandfathers delighted in solemn the dates on this question. Later, about 1890, saturated with the aura of a rather primitive positivism, the methodologists were indignant that the public should attach an excessive importance to what they call “form“ in historical works. Art versus science, form versus matter: the history of scholarship abounds with such find debates!

There is no less beauty in a precise equation than in a felicitous phrase, but each science has its appropriate aesthetic of language. Human actions are essentially very delicate phenomena, many aspects of which elude mathematical measurement. Properly to translate them into words and, hence, the fathom them rightly (for can one perfectly understand what he does not know how to express?), great delicacy of language and precise shadings a verbal tone are necessary. Where calculation is impossible we are obligated to employ suggestion. Between the expression of physical and of human realities there is a much difference as between the task of a drill operator and that of a lutemaker: both work down to the last millimeter, but the driller uses precision tools, while the lutemaker is guided primarily by his sensitivity to sound in touch. It would be unwise either for the driller to adopt the empirical methods of the lutemaker or for the lutemaker to imitate the driller. Will anyone deny that one may not feel with words as well as with fingers?
Chapter 3: Historical Time

We have called history “the science of men.“. That is still far too vague. It is necessary to add: “of men in time.” The historian does not think of the human in the abstract. His thoughts breathe freely the air of the climate of time.

To be sure, it is difficult to imagine that any of the sciences could treat time as a mere abstraction. Yet, for a great number of those who, for their own purposes, chop it up into arbitrarily homogenous segments, time is nothing more than a measurement. In contrast, historical time is a concrete and living reality with an irreversible onward rush. It is the very plasma in which events are immersed, and the field within which they become intelligible. A number of seconds, years, or centuries required for a radioactive substance to change into other substances is a fundamental datum for the atomic scientists. But the idea any particular one of those metamorphoses had occurred a thousand years ago, or yesterday, or today, or that another such is bound to occur tomorrow – all of which would unquestionably interest the geologist, because geology is, in its way, a historical discipline – leaves the physicist perfectly unmoved. In his turn, no historian would be satisfied to state that Caesar devoted eight years to the conquest of Gaul, or that it took fifteen years for Luther to change from the Orthodox novice of Erfurt it to the reformer of Wittenberg. It is a far greater importance to him to assign the conquest of Gaul its exact chronological place amid the vicissitudes of European societies; and, without in the least denying the eternal aspect of such spiritual crises as Brother Martin’s, he will feel that he has given a true picture of it only when he has plotted its precise moment upon the life charts of both the man who was its hero and the civilization which was its climate.

Now, this real time is, in essence, a continuum. It is also perpetual change. The great problems of historical inquiry derive from the antitheses of these two attributes. There is one problem especially, which raises the very raison d’etre of our studies. Let us assume two consecutive periods taken out of the uninterrupted sequence of the age. To what extent does the connection which the flow of time sets between them predominate, or fail to predominate, over the differences born out of that same flow? Should the knowledge of the earlier period be considered indispensable or superfluous for the understand of the later?