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3.

**The Expression of Historical Experience**

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**Abstract**

The theory and philosophy of history (just like philosophy in general) has established a dogmatic dilemma regarding the issue of language and experience: either you have an immediate experience separated from language, or you have language without any experiential basis. In other words, either you have an immediate experience that is and must remain mute and ineffable, or you have language and linguistic conceptualization that precedes experience, provides the condition of possibility of it, and thus, in a certain sense, produces it. Either you join forces with the few and opt for such mute experiences, or you go with the flow of narrative philosophy of history and the impossibility of immediacy. Either way, you end up postulating a mutual hostility between the nonlinguistic and language, and, more important, you remain unable to account for new insights and change. Contrary to this and in relation to history, I am going to talk about something nonlinguistic—historical experience—and about how such historical experience could productively interact with language in giving birth to novel historical representations. I am going to suggest that, under a theory of expression, a more friendly relationship can be established between experience and language: a relationship in which they are not hostile to but rather desperately need each other. To explain the occurrence of new insights and historiographical change, I will talk about a process of expression as sense formation and meaning constitution in history, and condense the theory into a struck-through "of," as the expression of historical experience.

*Keywords:* historical experience, experience, language, theory of expression, aesthetics, phenomenology, new insights, discontinuous change
BLASPHEMOUS RUMORS

On the following pages I plan to commit metaphorical blasphemy. Being metaphorical, the sort of blasphemy I have in mind is not directed against religious sentiments, but against what has become an authoritative view within the theory and philosophy of history in recent decades. However liberating this view proved to be to former generations, after a period of excitement created by the first encounter, my generation had to face it in the shape of the establishment. Being the establishment, its initial grace began to look somewhat faded, and—somewhat naturally—it appeared to be less fresh and vivid, and more restrictive and limited. On this premise, any challenge posed to that view counts today as faithless and faithful at the same time: faithless and sometimes oppositional to the arguments upon which it rests, while faithful and indebted to its liberating intentions. This is the dual ground on which I plan to proceed when, in the broadest terms, I talk about the possibility of a productive interaction between language and the nonlinguistic in order to explain discontinuous linguistic change. On a narrower scale, it means that in relation to history, I am going to talk about the question of how historical experience as something nonlinguistic could productively interact with language in giving birth to genuinely novel historical representations that challenge received wisdom.

The current conviction about the issue is not hard to summarize. It says that although it is possible to talk about both language and something nonlinguistic separately (or as the one prefigures the other), any productive interaction between them is utterly impossible. It says that the choices are rather limited: either there is experience and then there is no language; or there is language and then there is no experience. As for experience, philosophy has been under the impression at least since the Kantian critique that we cannot have immediate experiences, that we cannot have experiences without the pre-structuring work of our categories of understanding. In other words, whatever we experience, we cannot escape the fact that we experience it, which means that this we must be constitutive of whatever is experienced and of experience itself. Since Kant’s categories of understanding, this determinant we has meant various things: our mental content; our social and cultural constraints; our ideological leaning; our brain; our body; and throughout the last century and most dominantly, our language. Although from time to time it seems to be possible to witness efforts to talk about a mind- or language-independent reality, the idea of the impossibility

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1. See, recently, the “speculative realist” critique of “correlationism.” Whereas the former term refers to a heterogeneous philosophical stand with a shared agreement over a metaphysical realism according to which it is possible to talk about reality as it is, independent of our conceptualizations, the latter term, introduced by Quentin Meillassoux, describes the tradition against which “speculative realism” is set, namely, the philosophical tradition according to which it is possible to talk only about the correlation between reality and thought or language, but not about reality itself. Even though Meillassoux’s “correlationism” is widely criticized even among other proponents of speculative realism, most of them are willing to attribute some unity to their various efforts. See Quentin Meillassoux, After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency (London: Continuum, 2008);
of immediacy prevails both in philosophy and within the narrower field of the theory and philosophy of history.

Anyone who did not hear something like this from Kant would likely hear similar things from structuralists, poststructuralists, narrative philosophers of history, social constructivists, and practically all who consider themselves (or are considered by others as being) postmodernists. Their common agenda of emphasizing the mediated character of experience, however, is only one side of the coin. The other side is experience as mute, or experience as infancy, as Giorgio Agamben calls it in saying that “a primary experience, far from being subjective, could then only be what in human beings comes before the subject—that is, before language: a ‘wordless’ experience in the literal sense of the term, a human infancy, whose boundary would be marked by language.”\(^2\) Whereas these words recognize a nonlinguistic realm on the one hand, on the other—and more important—they set up the territory of the nonlinguistic, which happens to end where language begins. This constellation is precisely what the pioneer adventures into the nonlinguistic tend to result in: the reinforcement of the separation of language and experience, culminating in either having an immediate experience that is incommunicable and inexpressible, or having language without any immediate experiential basis.

In the context of the theory and philosophy of history, even Frank Ankersmit, the most eminent proponent of historical experience, maintains the dilemma by accepting the mutual exclusion of experience and language in claiming that “where you have language, experience is not, and vice versa.”\(^3\) What is more, in a recent talk at Ghent University, Hans Kellner approved the status quo by making peace with it.\(^4\) Kellner depicted the two main orientations of recent years within the theory and philosophy of history—an orientation toward narrative, language, and the linguistic associated with Hayden White, and an orientation toward experience and the nonlinguistic associated with Ankersmit—and argued that they seem to embody contradictory movements. He did not see any reason for thinking that, provided this situation, we should strive for any reconciliation or harmony between these orientations and went on to claim that because we are

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comfortable with extremes, we pretty conveniently can inhabit extremes, and the
best we can do is simply “toggle” back and forth between language and experi-
ence.

Even though I can acknowledge that Kellner’s approach might be the actual
attitude most of us have toward our experiences, and even though it seems obvi-
ous that many times we just do not even try to voice most of these experiences,
there certainly are times when we do. These latter times are the ones that I will
try to account for. Without these times, Kellner could not even talk about “ex-
tremes,” because if there were nothing but those times of either-or, then neither
of the two options would be extremes in any sense. There are extremes only
when there are other times with other options in whose relations extremes can be
set, and one of these other options is what I am interested in. Not because I wish
to prove that under an extraordinary constellation of stars we eventually might
be able to transfer our experiences into language without any damage done to
them. I can happily accept the impossibility of that. I am interested in another
option because I see no reason why the acceptance of the position that such a
straight transfer is impossible would necessarily entail that experience and lan-
guage cannot be engaged cooperatively in any other way in producing new in-
sights. This latter point, that what a productive interaction brings about is the
birth of new insights, is the most crucial one, given that no theory that keeps
experience and language separated seems to be able to account for it. On the one
hand, a mute experience lacks linguistic conceptualization to attribute sense to
that experience, without which the novelty of experience is hardly an insight. On
the other hand, linguistic conceptualization that prefigures experience is some-
thing we already have at our disposal, because of which an insight gained this
way is anything but qualitatively new (what I mean by “qualitatively new” will
become clear later).

This being the received view does not mean that there are no efforts to con-
ceptualize the situation differently, efforts that could either deliberately or im-

cipically suggest that the dilemma outlined above might be false. It appears to me
that—among a few others—Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Eelco Runia, and Anton
Froeyman suggest something like this in their own respective ways. However, I
do not wish to offer ways to “amalgamate” language and the nonlinguistic as
Gumbrecht does, to follow Runia in postulating a transfer of the nonlinguistic
into language via metonymy, or to support Froeyman in linking language and
experience through poststructuralist ethics. 5 To me—in one way or another—all
these conceptualizations seem to entail a return to an operation against which the

5. See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Presence Achieved in Language (With Special Attention Given
to the Presence of the Past),” History and Theory 45, no. 3 (2006), 317-327; Eelco Runia, Moved by
the Past: Discontinuity and Historical Mutation (New York: Columbia University Press), 65-75; and
Anton Froeyman’s contribution in this issue, or his forthcoming book, Anton Froeyman, History,
dilemma had been set up in the first place, namely, the possibility of an admittance of the nonlinguistic into language. Although Gumbrecht, Runia, and Froeyman seem equally to accept this possibility, I cannot. My reasons for this (and the presently very vague notion of “admittance” by which I characterize this operation) will become clear at a later stage of this essay. For the time being, I would like to note only that notwithstanding all my general sympathies that lie with these efforts, I cannot agree with their particular suggestions.6

All in all, on the following pages I intend to join forces with the few like Gumbrecht, Runia, and Froeyman, but also contrary to their position as well as contrary to the dogmatic dilemma introduced above, I am going to suggest that, under a theory of expression, a more friendly relationship can be established between experience and language—a relationship in which they are not hostile to but rather desperately need each other in producing new insights. This relationship can be established in a way that, according to my optimistic scenario, might satisfy both those who strive for immediate experiences and are willing to sacrifice language in its name and those who stick to the idea of an omnipotent language and are willing to sacrifice immediacy in its name. In fact, one of the main reasons this scenario might be attractive is that it suggests that there is no need for such pseudo-heroic sacrifices at all.

I will try to satisfy everyone in five steps, in the shape of five short sections. Four of these sections will make up my main argument; the fifth one is reserved for an argument about the significance of the main argument. As for the concrete steps, first I will depict the current situation in the theory and philosophy of history regarding expression, a situation in which expression as such cannot be named because naming it would contradict the basic principles of linguistic and narrative theories. In the second step I will argue that this is so because when we think about expression, we tend to rely on a notion of expression we tacitly rely on in our everyday lives. Next, in the third section I will leave behind the description of the situation and try to overcome these obstacles by finding a way to name expression and by creating a notion of expression different from the one we rely on in our everyday lives. Then, as a fourth and final step of the main argument, I will condense this notion of expression into a struck-through “of” in talking about the expression of historical experience. Finally, I will offer some closing remarks on the significance of the entire enterprise.

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6. I thank Kalle Pihlainen for our long discussions during his stay in Bielefeld about how these theories (and also, how the core points of the theory I outline in this essay) relate to narrativism and to Hayden White’s philosophy of history. Although we hardly came to an agreement over some essential points, our debates substantially enhanced my understanding of those essential points. As for the issue at hand, for his argument that the efforts I mention above advocate pre-linguistic-turn concerns, see Kalle Pihlainen, “The Eternal Return of Reality: On Constructivism and Current Historical Desires,” Storia della Storiografia 65 (2014), 103-115. My take on the issue is rather that what they advocate is something different, even though there might be some respects in which they either unconsciously or sometimes deliberately fall prey to those concerns.
Those who are familiar with the Harry Potter universe might find some value in the characterization of expression as the Lord Voldemort of the theory and philosophy of history. Even though expression, unlike Lord Voldemort, is far from being a dreadful villain in this particular story, this is the claim I would like to begin with: expression is Lord Voldemort in the sense that it is the “You-Know-What” and “The-Thing-That-Must-Not-Be-Named” of the theory and philosophy of history.

It became the “You-Know-What” and the “The-Thing-That-Must-Not-Be-Named” when the issues of narration and language took over the theoretical field. Not right away though, not when narration and language entered the scene and the golden days of analytical philosophy of history began. Expression became the unnamable apparition when those days ended, when the questions of analytical philosophy of history were suddenly dropped, and when theoretical discussions moved from sentences to texts. Since then, although almost nothing has been said about expression itself, it discreetly lurked behind the entire discussion. In a latent but overwhelming way it was both present and nonpresent at the same time in postmodern theories of history as discourse, in explorations into the rhetoric of historical representation, in investigations concerning the stylistic features of historical writing, in assessments of the capabilities of historical narratives, in enumerations of the literary devices used (or recommended for use) by historians, and, of course, in Hayden White’s narrative philosophy of history, which, either directly or indirectly, inspired many of the aforementioned approaches. All in all, in its dormant all-pervasiveness, expression was there all

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8. Within a sentential universe of analytical philosophy of history—but in the days when the entire enterprise had already been pushed to the background—Jonathan Gorman nevertheless tried to consider a historical account as an expression of knowledge insofar as “its constituent and implicated statements are acceptable as true, it acceptably includes all and only statements relevant to an explanation or description of that matter, and such statements are expressed in terms of an acceptable conceptual scheme of classification, all such acceptability being made by rational people on the basis of a rational standard.” Jonathan Gorman, The Expression of Historical Knowledge (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982), 55. However, in treating historical accounts as the sum of its constituent statements, Gorman could not connect to the textualist mainstream that investigated historical writing on the premise that the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

9. See, for instance, Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Ann Rigney, The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990); or Alun Munslow, Narrative and History (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2007). As for Hayden White, even though according to the canonical story it is his Metahistory that practically opened up a field of scholarly study, his essays might have been in a way more influential in establishing what now, in hindsight, seems to be a narrativist tradition. See Hayden White, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Hayden White, Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Balti-
the time. It just could not be named—or at least was not supposed to be.

Expression could not be named because the explicit invocation and the naming of expression would have entailed the naming of whatever was being expressed. Or, to put it more emphatically, calling histories linguistic expressions would have demanded having an answer to the question “Expressions of what exactly?” Narrative-linguistic theories of history, however, were not supposed to have an answer to the question in the first place. The entities that populated the narrative-linguistic landscape were entities that could be studied and analyzed within or as language—entities such as linguistic tropes, styles, literary devices, modes of emplotment, discursive strategies, and so on—and because of their “being within” or “being as” language, none of them could be named as the expressed of histories. And if there is no expressed to express, there can be no expression. At least it would be somewhat odd to claim that what a particular history expresses is a certain style or a certain mode of emplotment, or that, in general, what language expresses are linguistic entities that inhabit language. Claiming this would be no more than claiming that language eventually expresses itself, which would probably strike everyone as nonsense. Therefore, in the final analysis, it seems that the case with narrative theories and the question of expression was not only that narrative theories were not supposed to have any answer to the question; the case was rather that they could not even pose or make sense of the question.

This, briefly, is how the question of expression and narrative-linguistic theories relate to each other. If linguistic conceptualization precedes our encounters with any nonlinguistic conceptualization, and if, in consequence, our experience is linguistically prefigured, then there is no experience, only language; and if there is only language, then there is nothing left to be expressed by language—except language itself. But could anyone claim that language eventually expresses itself? Would it count as an expression? What instantaneously comes to mind as an answer is that it would rather embarrassingly contradict our everyday notion of expression, which we so comfortably rely on not merely in our everyday lives but, apparently, also in our academic theories. Therefore, in order to get a fuller grasp of the problem, in the next section I would like to briefly analyze it.

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In our everyday lives, expression features as an entity that connects two supposedly separated spheres. To provide an example that stays within the confines of the theory and philosophy of history and thereby shows how far-reaching this notion of expression is, I would like to consider the sphere of events and the sphere of thoughts in the case of Collingwood. To begin with, in *The Idea of History*, Collingwood famously/infamously claims that historians are “concerned with thoughts alone,” thereby opposing the view that history is about change as a succession of events in favor of a conception of history as knowledge of mind. Nevertheless, with the focus on thoughts, Collingwood does not attribute complete insignificance to events but lays down the conditions for their significance, and what emerges as a protagonist under these conditions is expression:

Unlike the natural scientist, the historian is not concerned with events as such at all. He is only concerned with those events which are the outward expression of thoughts, and is only concerned with these in so far as they express thoughts. At bottom, he is concerned with thoughts alone; with their outward expression in events he is concerned only by the way, in so far as these reveal to him the thoughts of which he is in search.10

The most important aspect to note is that—as Collingwood implies with the qualification “those events”—events are not necessarily expressions of thoughts. Events as such do not inherently contain, embody, exhibit, and expose thoughts as such, meaning that thoughts do not belong to the sphere of events. Without expression, in their own right, events and thoughts are two distinct spheres, and thoughts could not be traced within the sphere of events if expression were not postulated in order to establish a connection between the two distinct spheres. It is the established connection that results in a re-placement of thoughts, and it is only when expression is postulated that the expressed—which, before the postulation of expression is not even an expressed—can be said to belong to whatever is supposed to express it. In other words, (1) expression presupposes two distinct spheres, which, (2) by and in expression become one in a way that the sphere that is supposed to express an expressed has to take in, embody, house, or admit the potential expressed.

These two features, (1) the *initially distinct spheres* and (2) the *act of admittance*, seem to be the prerequisites for our everyday notion of expression. This is the case for every expression we tend to take for granted in our everyday lives and, as Collingwood’s case shows, even in our academic activities. As an everyday life example, our gestures are supposed to express our emotional states insofar as our emotions do not belong to the sphere of gestures but become admitted into it by the postulation of expression. Another illuminating example is graphology (at least for those who used to practice handwriting), where the distinct-

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ness of the two spheres between which expression is supposed to establish a connection—our handwriting and our personality traits—looks even more obvious.

In much the same way, according to our tacit, everyday notion of expression, by language we are supposed to express something other than language itself, something other, which, before an act of admittance could take place by expression, does not belong to the sphere of language. Further, this something other (the expressed of linguistic expression) is supposed to be the ultimate object of curiosity, just as in the case of Collingwood who is ultimately curious about thoughts, or in the case of graphology, which is curious about our handwriting in order to satisfy curiosity about our personality. And this is precisely why expression could not be named by linguistic theories: because according to our notion of expression tacitly held, it would entail an admittance of the nonlinguistic into the linguistic. The possibility of translating experience through expression into language, that is, the idea of language as a medium, contradicts the most fundamental principles of both the Kantian critique and the more recent linguistic enchantment.11

NAMING EXPERIENCE AS THE EXPRESSED

Arriving at this point and identifying the problem inherent in the current state of the field, the challenge seems to be clear. In order to be able to talk about linguistic expression concerning history, in order to establish a productive interaction between the nonlinguistic and the linguistic (and in order to do so in a way that satisfies both those who strive for immediate contact with the world and those who rather wish to remain within the confines of language), something like an expressed has to be named. But, in order to avoid falling back to entertaining pre-linguistic-turn and pre-narrative-theory concerns, this expressed cannot be a proper expressed in the sense that it cannot act as a medium and cannot entail any straightforward admittance of the nonlinguistic into language. As a response to this challenge, in the rest of this essay I will do two things. First, I will name expression by naming a potential expressed other than language itself: historical experience. Then, in the next section I will clarify how this cannot actually be an expressed in the sense of our everyday notion of expression.

As for naming something like an expressed, historical experience as the po-

11. Cf. Richard Rorty’s words of appreciation on Donald Davidson, whom he interprets as some- one who “breaks with the notion that language is a medium—a medium either of representation or of expression.” Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 10. In the final section, I will return to and discuss Rorty’s position from a different angle. As for the context of the theory and philosophy of history, it is probably Keith Jen-kins who urged most the acceptance of a Rortyan position. See especially the chapter on Rorty in Keith Jenkins, On “What is History?” From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 99-135.
tential candidate has three main interrelated features. First, the experience is historical in the sense that it is an experience of a particular piece of the past. It is neither an experience of history as the course of events, nor past people’s experience of their own environment. It is what Ankersmit calls subjective, individual historical experience as opposed both to sublime, collective historical experience (the experience of history understood as the course of events) and to objective historical experience (the experience past people had). It might be provoked by an “encounter” with any remnant of the past existing in the present, be it material or immaterial, say, a postwar abstract expressionist painting, a medieval chronicle either as you touch it in its materiality or as you read it, a room left untouched for ages, an idea you come across in Voltaire or a weird story in Plutarch, or the melody of Michael Jackson’s Billie Jean. But in order for these examples to qualify as (subjective) historical experiences, they have to be unfamiliar in the sense that such experience is not a recollection. A historical experience is not a memory of a Barnett Newman painting to revisit, but an encounter with the painting in a way that had never taken place before: an encounter that carries the element of surprise. It is not to say that the painting or, for that matter, Billie Jean, has to be completely unknown in order for the experience to take place. Nothing excludes the possibility of the unfamiliarity and the surprise to emerge from an encounter with the supposedly familiar and quotidian.

The element of surprise leads to the second point, namely, that the historical experience I am interested in has a strong aesthetic character. By attributing an aesthetic character to it, I wish to stress the suddenness of historical experience, and because of its suddenness, its noncognitivity. With all this, as far as I am concerned, I remain in line with Ankersmit’s theory, even though my reasons for doing so are slightly different from his. Stressing noncognitivity gains significance when you take into consideration that the main reason post-Kantian philosophy denied the possibility of immediate experience was the role it supposedly played in cognition. In much the same way, the target of the critique of linguistic theories was this experience: experience as a matter of epistemology, as a matter of gaining knowledge. I do not see any way (or any reason) to restore the immediacy of such experience, but there is, I think, a way to reserve the possibility of immediacy for a characteristically aesthetic experience. In other words, I believe that it is on aesthetic grounds that the linguistic and nonlinguistic aspects of history (both its academic and nonacademic forms) can be engaged in a productive interaction.

As for my divergences, whereas Ankersmit binds his notion of historical ex-

12. Ankersmit, Sublime Historical Experience, 264-266.

13. See the chapter in which Ankersmit compares his notion of historical experience with a pragmatist aesthetic experience in ibid., 241-262.
perience to "moods and feelings," I would not restrict it to a territory that concerns only what we associate with the affectual. Nor would I confine the territory of such experience to the intellectual or the corporeal. As usual, even those who pursue the scholarly activity called "aesthetics" are in deep disagreement over what it is they actually pursue and what attributes an experience labeled "aesthetic" does or should have. The way in which I intend to make use of an aesthetic character of historical experience is indifferent to and therefore compatible with any approach within and outside aesthetics—be it a "movement" in Germany to redefine aesthetics as aisthesis, or all the variety of standpoints of analytic philosophy on the concept of "aesthetic experience"—insofar as it excludes epistemological concerns. Nevertheless, as it will soon become clear, I do not wish to get rid of those concerns entirely by this exclusion. What I wish to retain is the noncognitivity only of a sudden "encounter" with the world in the shape of a remnant of the past, that is, I wish emphasize the noncognitive character only of the experience that is still mute, only of the experience that is not yet a quasi-expressed of an expression, but an experience that can potentially be that exactly because in a moment of an "encounter" it disrupts our linguistic schemes.

In a certain sense, it is this "encounter" and disruption itself, or, even more, the experience of this very disruption and the cognitive void it entails, that I would like to characterize as being aesthetic and without epistemological concerns. This brings me to my third point, namely, that all this nears certain approaches within phenomenology, where it gets a clearer articulation in a broader sense. Thus, finally, the experience I am interested in is not only a subjective historical experience with an aesthetic character, but also an experience to which a certain sort of phenomenology and hermeneutics, and recently especially the Hungarian phenomenologist László Tengelyi, pays attention. The most im-

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17. The disruptive character of the aesthetic appears in both Gumbrecht and Ankersmit. At least I would like to interpret them such that where Gumbrecht talks about the insularity of aesthetic experience and its distance from our everyday concerns, and where Ankersmit talks about a decontextualized experience, they both invoke a moment that disrupts business as usual. But whereas they consider this moment to be a part of aesthetic experience, according to what I said above, this moment itself is what I would like to label as aesthetic. See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, The Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 101-103; Ankersmit, Sublime Historical Experience, 275-280.

Important peculiarity of this experience is its ability to thwart our expectations. Just like the disruption an aesthetic experience brings about, in a phenomenological experience our linguistic conceptualizations, instead of framing and producing experiences as linguistic theories claim, break down. What can be regarded as an experience in a phenomenological sense (and also, what deserves to be called experience according to Gadamer) is precisely the momentary collapse of our means of sense attribution.

There is no need to think here about anything mysterious. In the context of actual historical practice, such experiences that thwart expectations are less often the ones we face in abstract expressionist exhibitions or in 80s retro parties and more often the ones that occur during a customary archival visit or during any “encounter” with whatever gets identified as a source. It is most likely that the “encounter” rather takes place in a way similar to how Robert Darnton describes the moment out of which his book *The Great Cat Massacre* was born (even though of course it does not have to be confined to an encounter with written words):

There is no better way, I believe, than to wander through the archives. One can hardly read a letter from the Old Regime without coming up against surprises—anything from the constant dread of toothaches, which existed everywhere, to the obsession with braiding dung for display on manure heaps, which remained confined to certain villages. What was proverbial wisdom to our ancestors is completely opaque to us. Open any eighteenth-century book of proverbs, and you will find entries such as: “He who is snotty, let him blow his nose.” When we cannot get a proverb, or a joke, or a ritual, or a poem, we know we are on to something. By picking at the document where it is most opaque, we may be able to unravel an alien system of meaning. The thread might even lead into a strange and wonderful world view.20

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Even if I cannot support Darnton in claiming that historians “unravel an alien system of meaning” that arises out of their experience (because this would entail that the meaning was already there in first place), I think that the experience he talks about before that supposed unraveling of meaning could happen is precisely the disruptive experience, the experience of disruption itself. It is the moment of the birth of a new insight that disrupts previous schemes and gives way to a process of expression. This process may differ significantly from what Darnton thinks about it, but it cannot overshadow the fact that these are the situations that might result in overwriting existing histories, in much the same way that, according to Tengelyi, it happens regarding our life-histories. Tengelyi calls these moments “the critical situations that constrain us to rectify the stories held to be precise and authentic by ourselves,” that is, situations in which “we catch sight of an ungovernable and uncontrollable process that results in the spontaneous emergence of a dispossessed sense.”

This process that we catch sight of is the process of expression, the issue to which I would like to turn now to see how the experience that is mute and noncognitive may interact productively with language, and how this interaction results in new insights.

THE EXPRESSION OF HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE

Before anything else, I would like to condense the essence of the last section about experience into one sentence: In order to name expression, something like an expressed—a quasi-expressed—has to be named, and my candidate for this quasi-expressed is (1) a subjective historical experience with (2) an aesthetic character that (3) thwarts our expectations. I share the excitement with Tengelyi and phenomenology that this might be the cradle of new insights, or, in the context of history, the birthplace of novel historical representations, about which I would like to note two things. First, given the disruptive character of this experience, it must be clear now that whenever I talk about new insights as results, I mean insights that introduce discontinuous change; and second, experience can be regarded as a birthplace only in cases when the step toward expression is taken. This step, I believe, is due to an ethical impulse, to an approval of an ethical demand that pushes us toward expression in some cases, whereas lacking such approval we remain either stranded or pretty much content with our mute experience.

21. Tengelyi, The Wild Region in Life-History, xxvi. The nicest feature of this description is that it perfectly explains itself, at least for me. In hindsight (and it is always only in hindsight that we become able to identify such moments), reading Tengelyi was precisely such a critical situation, in which this project was born.

22. Even though I can’t get into a detailed discussion of the ethical dimensions of historical expression (or, in the vocabulary of the last decades, of historical representation understood here as a process instead of a final result), I would like to offer some preliminary remarks on the issue, which I touch upon at greater length in another paper (in progress) entitled “We Are History.” To begin
In this second scenario, because what we have is just another ineffable experience, our behavior is perfectly legitimate even in the eyes of narrative theories, insofar as experience stays away from linguistic concerns. But in the first scenario, once the step toward expression is taken, narrative theories have to face the familiar dilemma again, this time rephrased for my present concerns: either you opt for the possibility of change and new insights and then you open up language to admit experience into it; or you opt for language without being able to explain how linguistic change and new insights are possible. If you choose the one, you subscribe to our comforting, everyday notion of expression and doom language to subservience; if you choose the other, you go for the convenience of linguistic omnipotence and do not feature experience even in the smallest supporting role. I would like to suggest that this dilemma is a false one. There are not only two choices (one about a straight transfer of experience into language and another about language making up all experiences) in which one of the parties is always taking over a passive other. I would like to suggest that, by a shift in focus, it is possible to talk about the relationship of experience and language in terms of a productive engagement, in terms of a creative process of sense-formation in which two powerful parties do not sentence the other to passivity but rather cannot do without each other. The only thing required for this is to recognize that the dilemma itself rests on an inadequate notion of expression, and that taking sides by relying jointly on our everyday notion of expression can be avoided by dropping that notion, thereby introducing another, more sophisticated possibility to account for discontinuous linguistic change.

There is nothing compelling in regarding the process of expression as a straight transfer of experience into language that implies an act of admittance. In order to get a grasp on what difference it would make to drop our everyday no-
tion of expression, it is worth beginning with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, in which he struggled with his own version of the dilemma outlined above. In his case, the dilemma involved a thinking subject and thought on the nonlinguistic side, and language and speech on the other. In looking for a way out, the first thing he had to realize is that meaning does not lie on either side of the divide, that it is neither the property of an already formulated expression as a final product nor the property of anything primordially nonlinguistic that precedes expression, but is constituted in and through expression. What he realized was that expression as a process of meaning constitution is not what I call here the admittance of an expressed, but an operation of creation, that “the process of expression brings the meaning into being or makes it effective, and does not merely translate it.” And the way all this happens, according to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, goes as follows: “The new sense-giving intention knows itself only by donning already available meanings, the outcome of previous acts of expression. The available meanings suddenly link up in accordance with an unknown law, and once and for all a fresh cultural entity has taken on an existence.”

This, however, is not Merleau-Ponty’s final take on the issue, which does not come as a surprise. For even if expression features here as a creative process, the process itself does not involve anything nonlinguistic. It is only the recombination of what we already have at our disposal. Nevertheless, it does not mean that this description would not be able to account for anything: it might still be valid whenever it comes to continuous, progressive, or cumulative change. What it cannot account for is discontinuous change as a result of an experience that disrupts our previous linguistic schemes. In fact, Merleau-Ponty could not even consider this possibility inasmuch as he did not have a notion of experience in which the entire set of “already available meanings” he talks about collapses. It is rather Tengelyi, who—while having a point of departure in a notion of experience that thwarts expectations, on the one hand, and drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s posthumously published body of work, on the other—can consistently envision a language “that does not content itself with sedimented or instituted meanings.”

Tengelyi borrows from Merleau-Ponty and elaborates on the idea of a “wild sense” that might emerge in the process of expression and the idea that this emer-

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23. This, of course, does not mean that an already formulated expression could not be openly interpreted and that interpretations could not constitute meaning in the case of already formulated expressions, as reader-oriented literary theories of recent decades have held.


gent sense might be associated with “the expression of experience by experience.” The emerging sense is labeled “wild” because it is uncontrollable by the subject who is associated with producing it in the process of expression. As for the phrase “the expression of experience by experience,” in Tengelyi’s interpretation it means that the original experience is inseparable from the experience of expression, from our very struggle with language as we try to formulate a sense. At the end of the process, “the struggle for expression engenders an unpredictable sense which does not coincide with the originally intended meaning of the speaker,” highlighted by Tengelyi with the familiar example of writing, where the final result might be something entirely different from the original intention we began with.

The first remarkable consequence of these phenomenological investigations is that, accommodated to the concerns of historical writing, experience (the sort of historical experience I named as a quasi-expressed) might serve as an incentive to a struggle with language in a situation where our linguistic conceptualizations are momentarily collapsed. Then, because the career of experience is not reduced to initiation, I would like to call the inseparability of a mute experience and the experience of our sense-formulating efforts the duality of experience, and, following Tengelyi, to regard their melting together as a drive to expression, without which our histories would not be radically revised and redescribed from time to time. However, as is apparent in his example of writing, Tengelyi’s phenomenology of expression works with a primordial intention from which the ultimate expression eventually departs. In the case of historical writing and in the case of the sort of historical experience I talk about, this intention is never present in the first place. As I indicated earlier, what accounts for the step toward expression in the context of history is an ethical approval of a demand, which has nothing to do with the content of expression in terms of intentionality. In other words, in the case of history, instead of a primordial intention there is a demand to fulfill an ethical purpose that lies behind those historical representations we regard as historiographical classics that challenge disciplinary consensus.

Finally, there is a difference between talking about the process of expression as sense-formation and talking about the result as already formulated sense and

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27. Merleau-Ponty’s original mention of “the expression of experience by experience” goes like this: “In a sense the whole of philosophy, as Husserl says, consists in restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience, which in particular clarifies the special domain of language.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, transl. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 155.


29. For a more elaborated version of the argument on experience as an incentive and drive, see Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, “Experience as the Invisible Drive of Historical Writing,” Journal of the Philosophy of History 7, no. 2 (2013), 183-204.
constituted meaning. Once you shift perspective and begin to talk about the latter, you might still go with narrativism and claim that no original experiential sense can be traced upon which it would be founded. Similarly, you can still conveniently claim that in opposition to language and linguistic expression, there is the inexpressible nonlinguistic. However, these contentions (that lead to the dilemma with which I began) cannot overwrite the contention I take to be of utmost importance, namely, that once you shift your attention from final products, you begin to see that experience is not a foundation of constituted meanings and new insights but their midwife and cradle. And the whole process that accounts for their birth and constitution, or, on a larger scale, for how well-established meanings get challenged and replaced, is impossible without it.

What all this means is that between the static world of speechlessness and the nonetheless static world of already formulated expressions, already instituted meanings, and already written historical accounts, there is the dynamic world of sense-formation. This is the world where, theoretically speaking, the most gripping things happen. This is the process of the bringing forth of novel historical representations, the process that I would like to refer to as the expression of historical experience. Further, it is the simultaneous lack of admittance and the quasi-presence of a “something-like-an-expressed” (which is far from being a proper expressed in the sense of our everyday notion of expression) that I would like to visualize typographically by using the strikethrough. For it is the question of this of, the question of how to understand this of, around which everything revolves. It is the question of the expressed, the question of the extent to which it is only a “something-like-an-expressed,” the question of the boundaries this of might erect for expression, and, ultimately, the question of the extent to which the nonlinguistic and the linguistic can be engaged, hand in hand, in meaning-constitution and sense-formation, in giving birth to genuine novelty.

HOW THE TRICK IS DONE

So far so good. To run an inconveniently schematic review: the expression of historical experience refers to a process in which, first, there is an initial moment of historical experience (a characteristically aesthetic moment that thwarts our expectations); then, because of an ethical impulse, a step taken toward expression; then, our actual struggle with language (which we experience as the experience of expression itself that is inseparable from our initial experience); and finally, the result, the already formulated new sense, the already finished expression, the already finished novel historical representation that challenges received wisdom. In a wider context this process testifies that there is nothing compelling in drawing the usual conclusion from the narrative-linguistic critique, namely, that if language is not a neutral medium that translates the nonlinguistic, then language either prefigures experience or that experience remains mute and no productive interaction between the linguistic and the nonlinguistic is possible.
This conclusion is inevitable only in the light of our everyday notion of expression, and nothing excludes the possibility of dropping this notion of expression and exchanging it for another one instead of dropping the nonlinguistic in favor of the linguistic (or the other way around). The theory of expression sketched above points to a direction where a productive interaction of language and the nonlinguistic is not only possible but necessary for the birth of new insights, while, at the same time, it still does not treat language as a medium.

Once again, so far so good. But there is also the question that the English punk band, the Anti-Nowhere League, asked in a slightly different context in 1981: So what? At least this is the question that could be asked by anyone who takes Richard Rorty’s side in assessing what questions are significant and important to ask and what theoretical enterprises are worth pursuing. Consider the following paragraph taken from Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*:

I can develop the contrast between the idea that the history of culture has a telos—such as the discovery of truth, or the emancipation of humanity—and the Nietzschean and Davidsonian picture which I am sketching by noting that the latter picture is compatible with a bleakly mechanical description of the relation between human beings and the rest of the universe. For genuine novelty can, after all, occur in a world of blind, contingent, mechanical forces. Think of novelty as the sort of thing which happens when, for example, a cosmic ray scrambles the atoms in a DNA molecule, thus sending things off in the direction of the orchids or the anthropoids. The orchids, when their time came, were no less novel or marvelous for the sheer contingency of this necessary condition of their existence. Analogously, for all we know, or should care, Aristotle’s metaphorical use of *ousia*, Saint Paul’s metaphorical use of *agapē*, and Newton’s metaphorical use of *gravitas*, were the results of cosmic rays scrambling the fine structure of some crucial neurons in their respective brains. Or, more plausibly, they were the result of some odd episodes in infancy—some obsessional kinks left in these brains by idiosyncratic traumata. It hardly matters how the trick was done. The results were marvelous. There had never been such things before.  

As the title of this section indicates, the part of the passage I would like to pay special attention to is the rather detached statement that “it hardly matters how the trick was done,” that it hardly matters how novelty occurs. I must consider this attitude because what the process of the expression of historical experience wishes to account for is precisely the occurrence of novelty and the way in which discontinuous linguistic change takes place. To begin with, Rorty’s attitude is understandable to a certain extent. It is understandable insofar as he wishes to drop the question because he intends to offer a picture in which history understood as the course of events has no *telos*. But it is less understandable why the picture in which history has no *telos* necessarily entails dropping questions about how novelty occurs and how change takes place in a contingent universe. In fact, not trying to answer such questions has consequences about which even Rorty could not be wholeheartedly happy.

While those who are accused of leaning to mysticism are usually the rare pro-

ponents of the possibility of an immediate experience (even if they retain its muteness), I would like to point out that it might be the maintenance of the position that it hardly matters to answer questions about novelty and change that renders the entire issue mystical. And Rorty’s choice of words is wonderfully instructive in this respect. Yes, the phrase “how the trick is done” is a figure of speech, but it is not just a figure of speech. According to Rorty, linguistic change takes place in a way that you “redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it,” but he has no idea about the way in which these redescriptions occur. According to what I said earlier—namely, that without an “encounter” with the nonlinguistic, no discontinuous linguistic change can take place—as long as Rorty sticks to his epistemological framework and posits the separation of language and experience, he could not even have an idea about it. It is precisely this incapacity to have an idea that renders the question of the occurrence of novelty and change mystical; it is precisely this that makes Rorty talk about a trick and dismiss the entire question.

Rorty's dismissal, which stems from this incapacity, counters his own enthusiasm about linguistic change. For talking about novelty as a trick, talking about novelty as a given without being interested in how it takes place, is just like talking about the daily rise and disappearance of the glowing spot in the sky without asking questions about what it’s doing there and how and why did it get there in the first place, or about things that we drop always falling down instead of flying off without asking how and why this happens. Had astronomers and physicists taken these things as given and not asked “how” and “why,” novelty would not have occurred in the first place and there would have been no marvelous results to praise.

In other words, it seems to me that what motivates the perpetual redescriptions Rorty takes for granted are exactly the questions he forbids himself (and others) to ask. Or, in the most general terms, the attitude exhibited in the ban on asking such questions does not seem to keep us discovering, exploring, and inventing, but, in many respects, keeps us from doing these things. On the contrary, it is precisely the attitude of discoveries and inventions that results in the redescriptions Rorty praises, and these redescriptions are quite often explanations for things that have been previously considered mystical, like gravity or the movement of heavenly bodies. In much the same vein, what I tried to show


above on a more modest level, and with more preliminary intentions, is that there might be nothing mysterious in how new insights are born, neither in the most general terms nor in the context of the theory and philosophy of history. The irony of the story is that while a theory of expression that intends to account for how novelty occurs in historical representations is not an unveiling of a trick or a series of tricks done by historians or by anyone else, it can still be regarded as a Rortyan redescription in some senses. It is a redescription of redescription, if you will, a redescription of the way in which Rorty’s very concern, linguistic change, takes place.

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