

Presentist Variations on the Theme and Reference in (Music) Historiography

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1. It is not history (Geschichte) that should be visualized, but *historical condition* (Geschichtlichkeit) that should be *understood*, says Heidegger (Heidegger 2004). It is impossible to study bottom-up the way reference functions in a special kind of discourse, say historiographical discourse, i.e. building up from statements related to various historical objects to whole texts. One has to start on the discourse level and try to figure out what is special about the kind of discourse in question.

1.1. The basic intuition of presentism is right. What is critical in historiographical discourse is the fact that it takes place in the present, which is the present of historical observation. This relates to the following paradox in historical contemplation: how is it possible that we can study what is actually a finite piece of infinite time? Isn't it as if time stops when one is studying the period $t' \dots \rightarrow t$ ($t' < t$, and $t \leq p$, p = the present of historical observation)? Isn't it as if the present is petrified, an existential rock, from which one can contemplate the historical objects extended, as it were, in space?

1.2. The rock metaphor again: someone alone on a rock, say after a shipwreck, looking around, forgetting, be it for a while, what is so special about his looking, namely, that it is the *only* human looking around. The historian, on his/her part, has to forget -as a condition to his/her functioning as a historian- that his/her looking is special, due to his/her different ontological *status* from the people he/she studies; not in the obvious sense that the latter are dead (since he/she does not study them as dead but as-once-alive), but in the sense that they are images, spots on a picture, links in a chain of inference.

1.3. On the other hand, how is it possible that I, as a historian, can stand completely apart from a historical fact X, which I take, as an object of study, to be distinct and consummated, and which, at the same time, I can relate to -be it only in the epistemical sense? Which is this *ou topos* where this quasi re-enactment takes place?

Dealing with something as being in the historical past is to take it as being closed, deprived of becoming. This freezing of the historical frame corresponds to a stopping in the historian's flux of present time, something like a momentary stopping of the heartbeat for a couple of seconds in a day of one's life. This stopping interval is where historical contemplation first takes place, the place where it originates from.

2. Following Wittgenstein we can take 'time' as one of those words which plague philosophical inquiry, as a result of the latter's excursions beyond ordinary language use. However, we may reverse Wittgenstein's question and face the opposite problem: it is not so much 'time' -or 'history' for that matter- but the ordinary terms referring to historical persons or/and historical facts/events that are problematic, in the sense that they present us with a peculiar *shallowness* ("ordinary" is used here broadly enough to cover the layman and the historian alike). Talking of things past, as a special case of 'knowledge by description' ("special" in the sense that it is *a priori* by description), is shallow. "Shallow" means here: as deep as

a spot on a picture; trying to dig under a term used by somebody else to refer to an historical object -be it a person or a fact- is like trying to dig under a spot in a picture.

2.1. A picture in this sense is an epistemically indexed evaluation condition, a universe of discourse, a possible world, whereby *de dicto* readings could be infinitely shallow and then it is only by means of *de re* readings that digging under the spot can provide for meaning (both readings effected by a third person, i.e. one that interprets the historian's words). Now it is peculiar to historiographical discourse that the *de re* reading of one person is the *de dicto* of the next person and that thus all *de re* readings are reducible to *de dicto* readings, due to the ontological status of things in historical past, a kind of quasi-existence.

3. In this line of reasoning, the 'illness of history' (Nietzsche) can be described as sticking to the safety of the rock, refraining from jumping into the flux of the present. In a way, the cure from this 'illness' depends upon the attenuation or even the neutralization of the very scientific tools that are normally put forward to make the line clearer between the accomplished historical fact and the disjoint historian's present, in other words to guarantee the fact's accomplishedness and the disjointness of the historian's present. How much is history-writing affected by the 'illness' of history? In other words, which is this moment on the utopian rock of frozen time from which on history-writing starts to reproduce what Nietzsche would call the Christian, linear, life-negating model?

3.1. Example: The American composer and musicologist George Perle has written an article on the music of the fourteenth-century French composer of *Ars nova*, Guillaume de Machaut (Perle 1948). Perle detects the presence of short motives, which he says are used as "integrative devices" in Machaut's music. Perle is a twelve-tone composer and his interest in medieval music in general, and Machaut in particular, stems out of his own interests as a composer and what he calls "integrative devices" in the elaboration of the musical material. He thus construes a homology between Machaut and himself, in that both organize a previously unformed musical material with the help of 'integrative devices' such as tenor construction and short motives (the 'Floskeln' of German musicology) in Machaut, and serial techniques (using inversion, retrograde etc.) in Perle. In the picture constructed by Perle those devices are set in the theoretical framework of what he calls 'tectonics'. Perle is quite explicit in declaring that his approach is informed by the homology he sees between *Ars nova* and twelve-tone music. He actually goes so far as to rhetorically stage this homology in the way his text is laid out: the article begins with two lengthy citations, one from a text referring to the *Ars nova* isorhythmic motet, the second to the music of Arnold Schoenberg, in a way to convey the false impression that these are but two paragraphs in the same text:

In the entire history of music hardly an example is found in which the constructive energy of tectonics

attains to such a degree of rigidity as in these compositions. Of their technical refinements, however, the hearer perceives nothing. For the composer possesses the art of clothing each variation number in a brand-new tone-weft, of continually bringing on new harmonic and melodic shades and intensifications of tone, so that an impression of inevitable consistency results [Von Ficker 1929].

All the elements of the composition, down to the remotest ramifications of its less important voices, have been fabricated from one and the same texture; and all the details of the concrete forms lead back to the elements of a basic figure. The result is a stylistic purity, scarcely attainable by any other proceeding, and a really astronomical orderliness of the whole thing...Of course no listener is expected to recognize all the numerous entries and thousandfold variations [Krenek 1939].

In sum, Perle seeks and finds traces of his "integrative devices" in the compositions of Guillaume de Machaut, allegedly a kind of a proto-serial compositional method, i.e. a precursor of his own actual method of composition; So far history has been used in a positive way for Perle, i.e. Perle finds justification of his own way of seeing things as a composer in a composer of the fourteenth century and this gives him some power to move on; power, in the sense that his reading leads to the absorption of the Machaut elements to form a purely Perlean, though an enriched one, image of tectonics.

3.2. The *next step* would be either the destruction of this very image called "Machaut tectonics"; Or what would qualify as nietzschean historical-'illness' path consisting in sticking to tectonics-as-instantiated-in-Machaut, which would next lead to specify what is in Machaut that qualifies as tectonics; Which would at the end lead to the differentiation of what is specific in Machaut's method *contra* tectonics, all in all: to explaining away the first intuition linking tectonics with Machaut and breaking what started as a unitary idea to tids and bits awaiting for their proper historical allocation. The first option, i.e. the destruction of Perle's image, is the only positive way both for Perle (in order for him to continue his involvement with tectonics, as opposed to continuing his involvement with Machaut), *and* for me as an interpreter of Perle's text (be it in my capacity either as a Perle or as a Machaut scholar); actually this is the outcome of a meta-historical account like the one I just gave of Perle.

4. Historical accounts are analogical pictures of realities which do not exist any more and to which our access is limited and conditioned. "Analogical" is employed here in Nelson Goodman's sense, since the pictures in question are characterized by relative *repleteness*, and since between any two spots of the picture a third spot can always be discovered/inserted either without altering the picture or with the effect of producing a new but likewise replete picture of the same historical object. Awareness of these 'pictorial' qualities of historical accounts should lead one not to frustration over the unattainability of historical objectivity but to alertness to the possibility of a successful linking of a relevant historical piece of knowledge with the subjective interests that motivated historical inquiry in the first place; To the possibility, in other words, of moving through successive, non-vicious, hermeneutical circles -or rather spirals- in the succession: construal:destruction... *ad infinitum* - each new circle on a different level from the previous one (hence: spiral). Reference to historical objects (persons, events or situations) like reference to surrounding reality *is* possible, but, unlike reference to surrounding reality, is subject to the ontological regime of the quasi-non-existence of the historical past. In this sense this is a modified presentist thesis: "Presentist" in the sense that the only level upon which reference in history-writing is acknowledged as actually taking place is the historian's present; "Modified" because, to start with, reference to the past *is* accepted, but only in the sense that the latter is ascribed a *quasi-existence*, i.e. nor totally existent neither totally non-existent, but existent as a bi-dimensional picture whereupon historical objects are but spots of various sizes, colors, and shapes.

Literature

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