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J. H. HEXTER: NARRATIVE HISTORY
AND COMMON SENSE

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the contribution of historian J. H. Hexter to debates on the philosophy of History in the 1960s. It argues that Hexter's analysis of the role of rhetoric in historical narratives remains an instructive account of historical research and writing. A secondary theme is Hexter's endorsement of Carl Becker's view of 'Everyman his own historian' – the idea that historians' efforts to make sense of the past is akin to the people's efforts to make sense of everyday life.

KEYWORDS. Hexter, Becker, Mink, historical narrative, historical storytelling, historical explanation, rhetoric of history, history and common sense, philosophy of history.

According to the philosopher Louis O. Mink, 'in the second half of the twentieth century no historian in the United States has accomplished more in the way of sustained reflection on the practice of

historiography than Jack Hexter'.¹ This comment appeared in a festschrift for Hexter published in 1980, but 25 years later Mink's verdict still rings true. Hexter's philosophical exploration of the theory of historiography remains a unique contribution by a practising historian to a field still dominated by philosophers and literary theorists. It is a contribution, moreover, that, Mink apart, remains largely unexplored and unassessed.² Hexter's central preoccupation was with 'historiography', by which he meant the craft of writing history. At the heart of this craft was 'the rhetoric of history'—the language that historians use to convey the knowledge and truth of their texts. Such rhetoric, Hexter argued, 'affects not merely the outward appearance of history ... but its inward character, its essential function'. The rhetoric of history, one might say, had the appearance of form but was in fact part of the content — a content which conveyed 'knowledge, understanding and truth about the past as it actually was'. These quotes are from *The history primer*, published in 1971, which was the culminating text in Hexter's oeuvre on the rhetoric of history.³ Hexter's starting point in this book (whose alternative title was *(Some) First principles of historical discourse*⁴) was a definition of history as 'any patterned, coherent account, intended to be true, of any past happenings involving human intention or doing or suffering'.⁵ Typically, these patterned, coherent accounts took the form of narrative or, as Hexter preferred, 'historical storytelling'.

The prevalence of narrative in historical accounts was for Hexter a necessary prescription as well as a description of historiography. Telling a story facilitated historical reconstruction of the connectivity of past happenings, those patterns of human activities which form the

¹ L. O. Mink, 'The theory of practice: Hexter's historiography', in B. C. Malament (ed), *After the Reformation: Essays in honor of J. H. Hexter*, (Philadelphia 1980) 5. The essays in this festschrift are mainly devoted to Hexter's work as an historian of early modern Britain and Europe.

² But see the critical discussion of some of Hexter's central contentions in P. Munz, *The Shapes of Time* (Hanover NH, 1977); Richard T. Vann's assessment of Hexter in his 'Turning linguistic: history and theory and history and theory, 1960-1975', in F. Ankersmit and H. Kellner (ed), *A new philosophy of history* (London 1995) 40-69; and Peter Novick's scattered remarks on Hexter in *That noble dream: the 'objectivity question' and the American historical profession* (Cambridge 1988).

³ J. H. Hexter, *The History Primer* (New York 1971) 328. See also Hexter's 'The rhetoric of history', *History and Theory* 6 (1967) 3-13 and his contribution on the same topic to D. L. Sills (ed), *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, 6 (London and New York 1968).

⁴ *ibid.* 369.

⁵ *ibid.* 3.

basis of the coherence of historical accounts. This view contrasts with so-called 'analytical' history, which with its search for the 'causes' of history often resulted, Hexter believed, in a mere accumulation of causal 'factors', obfuscating the connections and interrelations of 'times, places, persons and circumstances'.⁶ Hexter's focus on historical storytelling converged with—and was indeed partly prompted by—the interest in the explanatory content of historical narratives of analytical philosophers of history like Morton White and Arthur Danto.⁷ Hexter agreed with the analytical philosophers that historical narratives were explanatory but differed over the analysis of the form and content of these narratives. Morton White detected a causal 'logic of historical narration' in historiography, whereas Danto explored the function of 'narrative sentences' as bearers of the explanatory content of historical accounts.

Hexter's alternative was an account of 'processive explanation' in historical narrative. The idea was that in constructing stories about the past, historians identified critical points of change or transition in the processes that interest them. To illustrate his point Hexter referred to a narrative of the last, deciding game of a baseball season, which turns on the scoring of a home run. This was the pivot point of the game, indeed of the whole season. The narrative (Hexter's own) is structured around this moment and is driven by a logic of historical rhetoric—the use of language to explain and impress upon the reader the importance of a particular act. Such pivot points are common in historical narrative and are selected by historians on the basis of the known outcomes that interest them. Knowledge of outcome is also crucial in determining the tempo of a narrative—where it begins and ends and the details and proportions of the sequencing of the story. 'Unless the writer has the outcome in mind as he writes his historical story, he will not know how to adapt the proportions of his story to the actual historical tempo, since that is knowable only to one who knows the outcome'.⁸

For Hexter, then, processive explanation and the role of retrospective knowledge were examples of the 'large structures of historical

⁶ *ibid.* 156.

⁷ See W. H. Dray, 'On the nature and role of narrative in history', in G. Roberts (ed), *The history and narrative reader* (London 2001) 25-39.

⁸ *The history primer*, 226.

discourse' or, alternatively, the 'macro-rhetoric of historical storytelling'—that is, the driving force of the rhetorical strategies deployed by historians, including the selection of facts embraced within the narrative. On the much-vexed issue of selection, Hexter argued that 'the outcome defines the appropriate historical macro-rhetoric, and the macro-rhetoric in turn dictates the selection of 'facts' ... Or to put it more bluntly, amid a mass of true facts about the past too ample to set down, historians choose not merely on logical grounds but on the basis of appropriate rhetorical strategies'.⁹ Historical narratives are also characterised by 'micro-rhetoric, the small details of the language and syntax by means of which historians seek to communicate what they know'.¹⁰ As examples of micro-rhetoric Hexter referred to the use in historical narratives of footnotes, quotations, lists and hypothetical subjunctives ('must' and 'may'). He also formulated three rules for the deployment of micro-rhetoric in historical narrative: (1) the Reality Rule, i.e. adherence to the evidence; (2) the Maximum Impact Rule, i.e. how best to convey historical reality to the reader; and (3) the Economy of Quotation Rule, i.e. direct quotation only when necessary for the achievement of (2).

Throughout his discussion of the rhetoric of history—macro and micro—Hexter is insistent that the goal of this rhetoric is 'to convey knowledge, understanding and truth about the past as it actually was'¹¹ (my emphasis). But Hexter's adherence to the Rankean dictum of *wie es eigentlich gewesen* was singled out for special criticism by Mink.¹² The philosopher pointed out that there was a contradiction between Hexter's assertion that narratives were constructed by historians deploying various rhetorical strategies and rules and his insistence on relating the past as it actually was. How could one ever know that the structure of the narrative represented the structure of historical actuality, asked Mink, especially given Hexter's equally strong emphasis on the role of a historian's subjectivity (his or her 'second record' of actual and imagined experience) in the creation of

⁹ *ibid.* 251. Cf Paul Veyne, 'Facts exist only in and through plots in which they take on the relative importance imposed by the human logic of the drama'. Cited by P. Ricoeur, *The contribution of French historiography to the theory of history* (Oxford 1980), 34-35.

¹⁰ *ibid.* 238.

¹¹ *ibid.* 238.

¹² Mink, *op. cit.*, 18-21.

narrative?¹³ There certainly seems to be a tension between Hexter's constant avowal of the subjective construction by historians of the patterns of the past and his insistence on telling it like it actually was. But, as Mink himself notes, while this tension presented a problem for a theory of historiography, it did not greatly vex Hexter since in practice historians do use rhetoric to construct successful narratives which provide a practical, commonsense knowledge of the past as it actually was, at least arguably so.

Hexter used the story of a 12-year-old boy who has to explain to his father why he has mud on his trousers to illustrate his point. Muddy Pants explains by telling a story:

Well, I had to stay late at school for Group Activities today. So I was in a hurry to get home, because I was late, so I took a shortcut through Plumber's Field. Well, some tough big kids hang around there, and a couple of them started to chase me—boy, they were really big—and yelled that they were going to beat me up. So I ran as fast as I could. Well you know it rained a lot Tuesday and there are still puddles in the field, and I skidded in one that I didn't see and fell; but they didn't catch me, and—well I'm sorry I got messed up. OK?¹⁴

Clearly, this is a highly selective, extremely biased account of what happened, one in which Muddy Pants deploys various rhetorical strategies designed to impact on his father's reception of the narrative. Equally, the story would be meaningless in the absence of some experiential sense of what Muddy Pants was talking about¹⁵ — which emphasises further the inter-subjective nature of the relationship between the narrator and the narratee. But, assuming Muddy Pants to be a reasonably reliable witness, does it impart knowledge of what

¹³ 'Historians write history, all men write what they write, say what they say, do what they do, on the basis of their own experience, because in fact there is no other possible basis for writing, or saying, or doing anything. And the experience of each man is inescapably of his own day or age or time', Hexter, 'Carl Becker and Historical Relativism', in Hexter (ed), *On historians* (Harvard 1979) 20.

¹⁴ *The history primer*, 31-32.

¹⁵ In this connection, see Munz's comment in *The shapes of time*, 55-58, that the intelligibility of the Muddy Pants story depends on shared knowledge and understanding of 'general laws' of everyday behaviour and human psychology.

happened and why, as well as provide a sense of what it was like to live out the narrative? Common sense tells us that it does, that Muddy Pants has given us a good historical account of what happened to him, albeit only from his point of view (no doubt the big kids would have a different story to tell). And what of Mink's point concerning the homology between the structure of historical actuality and the structure of the narrative? That depends on what is meant by 'structure'. If structure refers to the components, relationship, sequencing and results of action, it is not unreasonable to conclude that there is, in this case at least, a reasonable fit between the past actuality and the offered historical narrative. Of course, the Muddy Pants story was concocted by Hexter in order to make a point; actual historical narratives are usually a good deal more complex and questionable. Hexter argued, however, that there is an elemental continuity between the common sense narratives of everyday life—as exemplified by Muddy Pants—and historical storytelling. Like Carl Becker,¹⁶ Hexter believed that the efforts of 'Everyman' to make sense of life was not that much different from historians' efforts to make sense of the past. In both cases common sense, common reasoning and common experience are deployed to pattern, interpret and explain the world. 'Historians', argues Hexter, 'owe to common sense most of what they can rightly claim to know and understand about the human past'.¹⁷

There are, however, differences between the common sense deployed by Everyman and that deployed by historians. Historians often utilise different kinds of evidence and are guided by scholarly ethics as well as by practical concerns in their use of evidence. Above all there is a difference of aim. Historians aim to expand common sense by providing knowledge beyond the immediate and the everyday, including insights into what it must have been like to be another human being in a different time and place. Historical narratives typically attempt to explain what happened and why but also to explore 'what was what happened like'.¹⁸ To achieve this latter aim historians use what Hexter called 'translational' language 'to assist the reader to translate his experience from a familiar accepted context into a context strange and

¹⁶ C. Becker, 'Everyman his own historian', *The American Historical Review* 37 (1932) 221-35. For Hexter's assessment of Becker, see the article cited above, n. 13.

¹⁷ *The history primer*, 395.

¹⁸ *ibid.* 275.

perhaps initially repugnant'.¹⁹ As well as being translational, historians' language is often 'psychedelic'—aiming to expand the readers' consciousness and awareness of past human responses and experiences. Moreover:

... historians ... use language translationally and psychedelically not merely because 'history is an art', but as an indispensable means for communicating knowledge about the past ... As a result of the impact of the translational and psychedelic language on their second record, readers indeed learn things about what happened in the past that they could not learn otherwise.²⁰

Although 'common language is the special rhetoric of historical discourse'²¹ and provides the main terminology for historical narrative, the fact that historians' tales are texts not speech is of considerable rhetorical importance. Historians, says Hexter, use what he calls 'common formal historical prose' which is characterised by the utilisation of various substitutes for the non-verbal and dialogic elements that makes everyday speech such a powerful means of communication. Indeed, the ability to write good common formal historical prose is what distinguishes good history writers—or historical storytellers—from bad ones. Which is not to say that well-written history is necessarily good history. The quality of history is a matter of substance as well as rhetoric. Historians, says Hexter, 'tell the best historical story that their knowledge of the record of the past, their command of subsequent studies of that record, the use of their second record, and their control of common-formal prose permit them to'.²² Hexter's overall conclusion is that 'history is a rule-bound discipline by means of which historians seek to communicate their knowledge of the past'.²³ However, as Mink notes, Hexter's rules of narrative construction are more practical maxims than anything else. It is the exploration of how these maxims are applied by historians in the

¹⁹ *ibid.* 137-38.

²⁰ *ibid.* 141.

²¹ *ibid.* 77.

²² *ibid.* 189.

²³ *ibid.* 328.

writing of narrative that constitutes Hexter's most important contribution to the philosophy of history.

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