

STUDIES
IN
NEO-KANTIANISM
2

Costellazione Max Weber

Studi in onore
di Edoardo Massimilla

a cura di Giovanni Morrone,
Chiara Russo Krauss, Domenico Spinosa,
Roberta Visone

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Philosophical Grammar and Sociology. Some Remarks on Ranke, Humboldt and Weber

SANTI DI BELLA

Any person writing about history sooner or later ends up wondering to what extent to he must recur to aesthetics; the reason is to be found in the fragmentary, fleeting nature of the “material source”, the degree of which varies from one “genre” to another.

Developing a remark by Benjamin¹, I take for example this degree to be at its highest in the history of art and lowest in the history of philosophy. On the one hand, it is because one is dealing with artefacts, which are at least durable and continuous; on the other hand, because thoughts, albeit apparently feeble, withstand the ravages of time more than other “cultural objects”, in the same way that paper and papyrus, over very long periods, are stronger than wood, canvas and not infrequently even stone. To fill this material gap, the first move to take should be to search for more sources, but the further one proceeds in such a quest, the more evident it becomes that what is obtained needs much more, which then cannot be obtained.

This is because often it simply does not exist or has never existed. Inevitably, in this craving for information, there occurs a «regressus in infinitum» that turns archival research itself into an archive². This condition led Weber to wonder: «In what sense are there in general “objectively valid truths” in those disciplines concerned with social and cultural phenomena?»³.

Since they are required to mould fragments into a shape, which they presume cannot be connected either through chronology or causality, especially those historians active in the period of German historicism, such as Ranke and Humboldt turned toward aesthetics, not in order to lay out a captivating plot but to get to the

¹ See W. Benjamin to Ch. Rang, 9 December 1923 in W. Benjamin, *Briefe*, Th. Adorno und G. Scholem (hrsg.), Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M., 1966, p. 322.

² See S. Osthoff, *Performing the Archive. The Transformation of the Archive in Contemporary Art from Repository of Documents to Art Medium*, Atropos Press, New York-Dresden, 2009 and C. Baldacci, *Archivi impossibili. Un'ossessione dell'arte contemporanea*, Johan & Levi, Milano, 2017.

³ M. Weber, *Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy*, in *Methodology of the Social Sciences*, translated and edited by E. A. Shils and H. A. Finch, The Free Press, Glencoe, 1949, p. 51 (*Die “Objektivität” sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis*, 1904, in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, hrsg. von J. Winckelmann, Tübingen, 1985, p. 146).

truth⁴. Here I will show that this aesthetic “move” explains why, on the one hand, there was a “transition” of some ideas from Ranke to Weber, and, on the other, what the limits were.

In order to underline my point I shall stress the idea of «philosophical grammar» or “philosophy of language” in some essays by Ranke and Weber, make reference to W. von Humboldt and compare the outcome with Weber’s lines of thought. The difference between Ranke’s historicism and Weber’s sociology is the same as the one between representation and elaboration, and this difference has something to do with the meaning of “mimesis”.

First of all, we have to recall that Weber’s conception of truth was delineated in his critique of Roscher’s Thucydidian historiography and, thus, also of the historical thinking of Humboldt and Ranke⁵. Furthermore, as to historical contents, Weber shared Ranke’s vision of European world singularity when explaining the rise of «rational capitalism» in the West⁶:

Important here above all are the special characteristic features of Western rationalism and, within this particular type of rationalism, the characteristic features of modern Western rationalism. Our concern is to identify this uniqueness and to explain its origin. Every attempt at explanation, recognizing the fundamental significance of economic factors, must, first of all, take account of these factors.

However, the opposite line of causation should not be neglected, if only because the origin of economic rationalism depends not merely on an advanced development of technology and law, but also on the capacity and disposition of individuals to organize their lives in a practical-rational manner. Wherever magical and religious forces have inhibited the unfolding of this organized life, the development of an organized life geared systematically toward economic activity has faced wide-ranging internal resistance. Magical and religious powers, and the ethical notions of duty based on them, have been in the past among the most important formative influences upon the way life has been organized⁷.

This idea was developed in Ranke’s first book, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker*, where modern Europe was depicted as a dynamic system of states, competing with each other without any ultimate predominance and inside the same cultural tradition, enhancing culture, law, science, power and differences⁸.

⁴ See A. Muslow, *Fiction Imagination and the Fictive. The literary Aesthetics of Historizing*, in A.L. Macfie (ed.), *The Fiction of History*, Routledge, London and New York, 2015, pp. 31-39; J. Rüsen, *Rhetorik und Ästhetik der Geschichtsschreibung: Leopold von Ranke*, in H. Eggert, U. Profitlich, K.R., Scherpe (eds.), *Geschichte als Literatur*, J.B. Metzler, Stuttgart, 1990, pp. 1-11.

⁵ See M. Weber, *Röscher und Knies*, in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, hrsg. von J. Winckelmann, Mohr-Siebeck, Tübingen, 1988, pp. 10-22.

⁶ Attention similar to German historicism’s for individuality prompted H. Arendt to take the “new born” as the only ontological hope for the world. See H. Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989.

⁷ M. Weber, *The Uniqueness of the West*, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Roxbury Publishing, Los Angeles, 2002, p. 160.

⁸ L. von Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535*, Bd. 1, Reimer, Leipzig und Berlin, 1824.

This idea, a wide-ranging and perspectival version of the «balance of powers», is also at the core of Ranke's essay *Die grösse Mächte* where he argued for the individualised character of every historical phenomenon, driven by an inborn cultural and spiritual orientation. This explains his relative “anti-Hegelianism”⁹. In *Politisches Gespräch* 1836, one of his main theoretical texts¹⁰, Ranke outlined this idea by means of a cosmogonic metaphor:

Just as in our nebulae the volatile, liquid, schemes appeared here and there more compact and grouped around a nucleus. It may be possible to explain the first beginnings of growth in this way; but you cannot attain perception (*Anschauung*) and estimation of the fully developed individual phenomena¹¹.

The “essence” of a State, which for Ranke is the ultimate, though not the unique historical objective, is compared to a heavenly body whose bulk coagulates during the dark processes occurring in the forces operating in the forming of a nebula. Each individual State is to be regarded as if it were the outcome of a kind of random bifurcation:

When you have surveyed the entire firmament, even the immense stellar systems which constitute the Milky Way, and advance your gaze still deeper into infinite space, then in the ultimate distance you encounter a second night, as it were, still more profound and dark, at the bottom of which you perceive a new world of more marvelous phenomena¹².

Out of this blurred latitude a unit of action takes shape, i.e. an individuality which asserts itself in relation to the other units of action inside the same historical framework. This unusual way of describing the historical phenomenon shows (though not clearly) why historiography needs to be empirical and to avoid universal and teleological statements. Ranke's saying that history «will bloss zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen», according to which history must describe how something really happened is not properly his own since it had been reiterated from Lucian to Humboldt and Schelling. However, two elements are peculiar to his use: «wie», the manner, i.e. the process of events, and «eigentlich», where «eigen» means “proper to something”, individual, “immediate”¹³. Even though the “originality” of every historical being could be taken as irrationality, Ranke meant it was possible to face this issue through three steps: gathering and selecting information, tie them together

⁹ See G. Cacciatore, *Dilthey e Humboldt. La fondazione filosofica dell'individualità e la nascita della coscienza storica*, in A. Carrano, E. Massimilla, F. Tessitore (eds.), *Wilhelm von Humboldt. Duecentocinquanta anni dopo. Incontri e confronti*, Liguori, Napoli, 2017, pp. 395-422.

¹⁰ See A. Boldt, *Leopold von Ranke. A Biography*, Routledge, London and New York, 2019.

¹¹ L. von Ranke, *A Dialogue on Politics*, in Id., *The Theory and Practice of History*, edited by G.G. Iggers, K. von Moltke, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Indianapolis, 1973, p. 115 (*Politisches Gespräch*, in «Historisch-Politische Zeitschrift», II, 4, 1836, p. 789). One of the two “characters” is to be identified in Carl von Savigny, the mentor of Roscher.

¹² L. von Ranke, *A Dialogue on Politics*, p. 113 (*Politisches Gespräch*, pp. 787-788).

¹³ L. von Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535*, Reimer, Leipzig und Berlin, 1824, p. VI. See L. von Ranke, *Storia Storiografia Politica*, edited by S. Di Bella, with a note by F. Tessitore, Liguori, Napoli, 2015, p. 2.

by means of causalistic webs, depict this outcome aesthetically, i. e. corresponding intuitively to the original immediacy of historical phenomena.

With this astronomical metaphor Ranke underlines that his historical method is close to Kepler's investigative approach when he thrust his telescope into those skeins of developing elements, and watched a cluster of moving objects in order to find, at most, some uniformity. An unfathomable background of this kind advises us to stay close to the positive features of things and allows only tentative general considerations, while paving the way for an aesthetical appraisal of what the singular phenomenon means. Surprisingly, one finds in Weber the same metaphor, from which he drew almost an opposite conclusion. It is not possible, according to him, to represent the original state of the cosmos either as indeterminate, mysterious and purely potential or as ruled by laws. The cosmos is always an image of itself, which meets selection and processing criteria. These rules out the vague, dark, romantic scenario upon which Ranke attempts to justify intuition as the only proper means of knowing individuality. Weber wrote as follows:

Let us not, for our part, spare ourselves the trouble of examining these matters more closely – however often they have already been discussed. The first thing that impresses one is that the «astronomical» knowledge which was referred to is not a system of laws at all. On the contrary, the laws which it presupposes have been taken from other disciplines like mechanics. But it too concerns itself with the question of the individual consequence which the working of these laws in an unique configuration produces, since it is these individual configurations which are significant for us. Every individual constellation which it «explains» or predicts is causally explicable only as the consequence of another equally individual constellation which has preceded it. As far back as we may go into the grey mist of the far-off past, the reality to which the Laws apply always remains equally individual, equally undeducible from laws. A cosmic «primeval state» which had no individual character or less individual character than the cosmic reality of the present would naturally be a meaningless notion¹⁴.

In his critique to Oswald he developed a similar refusal of an «astronomic» view of culture¹⁵. In this way we begin to appreciate the difference between Ranke's and Weber's stance: for Ranke what matters, as regards the exceptionality of the European world, is the richness of singularities involved in it, each of them to be regarded as a contracted energy that flows against the others. For Weber too, sociology as a science of culture must not prescribe specific morality and must not claim essential laws of historical process: a science of culture aims to render an object meaningful by «selecting» the experience of it via a reference to a gnoseological value, an interest within a scientific tradition, and by means of a «utopian», abstract and plastic model called «Idealtypus». Yet, he thinks interpretative abstract models are needed in order to understand the interplay between aims, means and

¹⁴ M. Weber, «Objectivity» in *Social Science and Social Policy*, p. 73 (*Die "Objektivität" sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis*, p. 171).

¹⁵ M. Weber, *Energetische Kulturtheorien*, in «Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik», XXIX (1909), pp. 575-598.

conditions of personal and collective action: an intermediate point of view between mere factuality and absolute, precise science. Or, in other words, knowledge should be an elaboration, which cannot dispense with the awareness of its own logical and categorial conditions, because these are unavoidable in any statement considered valuable¹⁶. Thus Weber calls «Phantasie» what Ranke calls intuition. Weber thinks that behind Ranke's intuition a lot of "ideal-types" were working, of which he is unaware. Ranke would have thought that the ideal-typical tool that Weber speaks of corresponds to the pragmatic moment of his own method. This methodological phase, however, is not enough, because history is knowledge, inasmuch as it grasps its object, and does not only describe it rationally. For Weber every different approach to reality would be naturalistic and inconsistent or at least methodologically unwarranted:

A chaos of «existential judgments» about countless individual events would be the only result of a serious attempt to analyze reality "without presuppositions". And even this result is only seemingly possible, since every single perception discloses on closer examination an infinite number of constituent perceptions which can never be exhaustively expressed in a judgement. Order is brought into this chaos only on the condition that in every case only a part of concrete reality is interesting and significant to us, because only it's related to the cultural values with which we approach reality¹⁷.

Ranke's "cosmogonic" metaphor enables us to see that despite some overlapping as regards contents Weber's proposal differs a lot from his historicism, which remains aesthetic-cognitive. After gathering information and setting it out pragmatically, only an intuition could correspond to the elusive origin of the historical phenomenon. So Weber was, paradoxically, both wrong and right when he wrote: «That genuine artistry which, among the historians, Ranke possessed in such a grand measure, manifests itself through its ability to produce new knowledge by interpreting already known facts according to known viewpoints»¹⁸. It is not possible to explain better Ranke's urge for verification, his claim to stay as close as possible to historical facts by making a picture of them that should be both scientific and lifelike. Why might one come to know something new on the basis of something already known merely through an artistic skill?

Therefore, on the one hand it is right to speak of an «asynchronic historical-sociological collaboration» between Weber and Ranke¹⁹, whilst, on the other, we should also point out their «mismatch». We shall see that something similar to what

¹⁶ Cf. E. Massimilla, *Ansichten zu Weber. Wissenschaft, Leben und Werte in die Auseinandersetzung um "Wissenschaft als Beruf"*, Leipziger Universitätsverlag, Leipzig, 2008 and Id., *Max Weber zwischen Heinrich Rickert und Johannes von Kries. Drei Studien*, Böhlau, Köln-Weimar-Wien, 2012.

¹⁷ M. Weber, "Objectivity" in *Social Science and Social Policy*, p. 78 (*Die "Objektivität" sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis*, p. 176).

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 112 (p. 213).

¹⁹ H. Tyrell, *History and sociology. The First Century. From Ranke to Weber*, in «InterDisciplines», I (2010), p. 97.

for Weber would have been the sociology of culture, Ranke actually bore in mind when he opposed philosophical grammar and historical research on language. Before touching on this point let us read, in the same essay, a short «manifesto» of Ranke's pragmatic and aesthetic historicism²⁰:

Without a leap, without a new start you never can progress from the general to the particular. The spiritual force which suddenly arises as concrete phenomenon before your eyes in unimagined uniqueness cannot be derived from a higher principle. From the particular, perhaps, you can ascend with careful boldness to the general. But there is no way leading from the general theory to the perception of the particular²¹.

Empirical and causal knowledge should end up in an intuition, «Anschauung des Besonderen», because only a “visual” breakthrough grasps the object in its unity. From this point of view Ranke's historical gnoseology therefore lies somewhere between Baumgarten's and Schiller's aesthetics: research should collect and connect data, but to give shape to them knowledge and reasoning need a constructive and imaginative commitment, albeit always tentative²². In this way Ranke underlined that intuition is essential both to historiographical science and to political action and took part in the debate about the difference between the qualities requested by a historian and by a politician²³, a relevant issue for historicism throughout the 19th century and up to Weber. Ranke treated it specifically in the proslution he gave when, in 1836, he was awarded a full professorship²⁴. Having to confront the (apparent) burnout of the revolutionary movements at that time, Ranke warned those colleagues who inflated historiography as beneficial to political praxis, because if its protagonists had paid more attention to the past this would have prompted any of them not to trigger the Revolution. Every moment carries in itself the force that makes it what it must be: therefore, it would not be wise the political leader who, called to take decisions, only lets himself be driven by the lessons learnt from the past and does not strive to be in tune with this force. Whoever is imbued with historical culture but does not plant his roots in the living intuition of his people and State, is not fit to act politically. He could work as a historian. And the most natural comparison is again with art:

²⁰ Far from the Ciceronian and Volterrian «ubi bene, ibi patria», for Ranke «our mother country is not where we find happiness at last. Our mother country, on the contrary, is with us, in us. Germany is alive in us, we represent it, willy-nilly, in every country we go, in each climate», in L. v. Ranke, *A Dialogue on Politics*, p. 114 (*Politisches Gespräch*, p. 790).

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² See J. Süßmann, *Geschichtsschreibung oder Roman? Zur Konstitutionslogik von Geschichtserzählungen zwischen Schiller und Ranke (1780-1824)*, Steiner, Stuttgart, 2000, pp. 257-265.

²³ Cf. H. Paul, 'I Am Not a Politician'. *Professional Boundary Work in Wilhelmine Germany*, in «Journal of Modern European History», 18 (2020), pp. 237-242.

²⁴ L. Ranke, *Über die Verwandtschaft und den Unterschied der Historie und der Politik*, in *Abhandlungen und Versuche*, Sämtliche Werke, Bd. XXIV, Duncker und Humblot, Leipzig, 1877, pp. 280-293.

Die Ästhetik ruft zuletzt aus: der Poet wird geboren, und sie bezieht sich wie billig auf eine Kraft, die außer ihrem Wirkungskreise liegt; aber wie viele bilden sich ein, man dürfe ihnen nur einen Staat anvertrauen, leicht würden sie der Werkmeister sein und ihn trefflich einrichten! Gerade an dem, was das allerwichtigste, was die Grundlage des gesamten Daseins bildet, versucht man sich mit unberufenen Händen²⁵.

All in all, one is born Bismarck, one does not become Bismarck²⁶. Hence nothing is less «Rankean» than a “city” ruled by *historia magistra*, i.e. by scholars²⁷. Consistent with this approach, on the same occasion, he pointed out that historiography and history are distinguished in the same way as «theoretical philosophy» from «practical philosophy», i.e. science from action. In contrast to Weber, one might say that, according to Ranke, historiography could not give up new, technical and calculating disciplines, such as political economy, but that it should continue to be a literary and aesthetic, cognitive praxis²⁸. Although economics is effective for State policy, historical experience showed that its “character” could not be reduced to quantitative yardsticks, because it often shifts from them due to other deeper, motivating drives. Even for Weber, the economic factor is not always the most relevant: «The causal nexus by no means always points in a single direction» and «the formation of great states does not always follow the routes of export trade»²⁹. But for him this extra-economical drive is “prestige”, the same as in the national feeling. In Ranke’s view it is something more spiritual than psychological.

It is exactly those factors that make aesthetics so important as a peak of historical knowledge. Ranke acknowledged the role of political economy but deemed it subordinate to the endogenous, self-affirming power of the historical phenomenon. This seems to me to show very clearly the extent to which Weber might have assimilated aspects of his historical vision. Elsewhere, Ranke exemplified his point with the correlation between philosophical grammar and historical languages: «So-called philosophical grammar [...] never achieved anything by a logical analysis of general linguistic form»³⁰. I take he meant philosophical grammar in the Kantian logical meaning, as a science of language grounded on principles: not a «critique» but a «doctrine»³¹. Anyway, he had in mind an unhistorical and abstract science: philo-

²⁵ L. v. Ranke, *Vom Einfluss der Theorie*, in «Historisch-Politische Zeitschrift», I, 4 (1833), p. 822.

²⁶ See A. Boldt, *The Life and Work of the German Historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886). An Assessment of His Achievement*, Queenston Book, Lewiston, 2014, p. 176.

²⁷ See G. J. Henz, *Ranke’s fälschlich so genannte Vorträge Über die Epochen der neuern Geschichte. Eine Untersuchung zu Schein und Sein der Überlieferung*, in «Deutsches Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte», III (2009), pp. 408–451.

²⁸ See D. Fulda, *Wissenschaft aus Kunst. Die Entstehung der modernen deutschen Geschichtsschreibung 1760–1860*, De Gruyter, Berlin–New York, 1996, pp. 390–408.

²⁹ M. Weber, *The Economic Foundation of Imperialism*, in *From Max Weber. Essay in Sociology*, Routledge, London and New York, 2009, pp. 162–163.

³⁰ L. v. Ranke, *A Political Dialogue*, p. 114 (*Politisches Gespräch*, p. 788). The academic training Ranke got in Leipzig was as philologist. For the modest influence Kant’s on philology, cf. K. Rosenkranz, *Geschichte der Kant’schen Philosophie*, Voss, Leipzig, 1840, p. 232.

³¹ I. Kant, *Wiener-Logik*, Akademie-Ausgabe, Bd. XXIV, 1966, p. 813.

sophical grammar cannot explain the emergence of any real language. Of course, one cannot find in Ranke such theoretical precision, which leaves no doubt, but his remark about a theoretical grammar shows in my opinion that German historicism had acquired the vague idea of an analytical and structural approach to cultural and political knowledge, something not far, in general, from what Weber would have called «a conceptual shorthand»³² but intentionally dismisses even the very idea of it. I mean this happened because Ranke's historicism was imbued with theological overtones and paradoxically this renders the way Ranke wrote on German Protestantism's history different from the way Weber dealt with the same issue, generalizing it in its vision of historical religions as a framework within which singular histories and whole civilizations could be understood in their most profound tendencies. However, we had better keep following the linguistic path for its proximity to aesthetics. For example a philosophical grammar such as the one intended by Ranke is not even comparative linguistics in Humboldt's sense:

No matter how accurately we may explore the preliminary conditions, the gulf persists between the condition and the phenomenon which separates the something from the nothing. The same thing is also true at the instant of cessation. All human comprehension lies but midway between the two³³.

Humboldt's main problem was to give an ontological definition of what is a historical phenomenon. To this end he explored many dimensions of reality often following academic and, just as often, personal interests³⁴. In short, for him an object is historical when it is impossible to find premises from which its full understanding can be drawn: «The central element in every activity containing something of life is precisely what defies calculation, and that seemingly mechanical determination is nevertheless fundamentally subject to free and active impulses»³⁵. For his peculiar Kantianism³⁶, only «unsaturated» knowledge is properly «historical» or historicist³⁷, as with the action that cannot be fully explained through another one. Thus, historical applies to the space that opens up where the chain breaks in such a way that

³² M. Weber, *Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy*, p. 94 (*Die "Objektivität" sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis*, p. 193).

³³ W. v. Humboldt, *Linguistic Variability and Intellectual Development*, University of Miami Press, Coral Gables, 1972, p. 21 (*Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues*, hrsg. von A. F. Pott, Olms, Hildesheim, 1974, p. 48). See J. Walker, *Wilhelm von Humboldt and Transcultural Communication in a Multicultural World. Translating Humanity*, Camden House, Rochester, 2022.

³⁴ W. v. Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues*, hrsg. von A. F. Pott, Olms, Hildesheim, 1974, p. 42. See G. Morrone, *La genesi coesistenziale del senso. La filosofia del linguaggio di Humboldt come teoria della cultura*, in A. Carrano, E. Massimilla, F. Tessitore (eds.), *Wilhelm von Humboldt, duecentocinquanta'anni dopo. Incontri e confronti*, pp. 53-75; in this book my paper *Ranke e Humboldt*, pp. 283-299.

³⁵ W. v. Humboldt, *On the Historian's Task*, in *The Theory and Practice of History*, pp. 16-17 (*Die Aufgabe des Geschichtschreibers*, hrsg. von A. Leitzmann, Insel-Verlag, Leipzig, 1919, p. 25).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22 (p. 32).

³⁷ W. v. Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues*, p. 59.

it cannot be joined up again: when it is a chain in itself. The most striking case of this impossibility of calculating the “living”, is language, «eine unwillkürliche Emanation des Geistes»³⁸. In the first paragraphs of the book on the Kawi language one finds thoughts quite similar to Ranke’s, in accordance with a culture of image, the “Darstellung des Geschehenen”, that certainly has something to do with Kant’s philosophy and Goethe’s morphology³⁹ and the “changing” continuity in the sudden renewal of life as metamorphosis⁴⁰. Against this background, in his academic discourse on the task of the historian in 1821, Humboldt, on the one hand, lists all the causal factors, such as climate, territory, which are instrumental and ultimately “calculating”, and, on the other hand, lists the “character of nations and individuals”:

springing up out of nowhere as if planted by a miracle, dependent on powers dimly perceived and visibly activated by eternal ideas rooted deeply in the soul of man – all this composes an infinitude which the mind can never press into one single form but which incites the historian to try just that again and again and gives him the strength to achieve it in part⁴¹.

So the difference between the historian and the poet becomes quantitative, because the historian’s use of “imagination” has to be limited to verified facts, whereas the poet’s imagination obtains the same freedom as nature. Humboldt was thinking of Goethe’s interpretation of the Aristotelian notion of mimesis, as the opposite of mechanical replication: art does not merely reproduce in an artifice what happens in reality, but precisely in this way conveys the truth of it⁴². In other words: the artist is a mime-artist rather than an imitator. So is the historian. Despite Humboldt’s influence on Weber, there is a clear difference here. For Weber, knowledge cannot but be reality elaborated. According to Rickert, one cannot avoid being logical even as a linguistic subject: in this sense, a grammar should be always philosophical. For Humboldt, too, knowledge cannot simply reproduce reality; only for him this means being aesthetically positive, i.e., joining the aesthetic insight into the fact (a second-level hunch after the first empirical approach) with its logical and structural understanding. If Weber therefore rejects mimesis because of naturalism, Humboldt understands it in a truly Aristotelian sense, as the best way to stay in touch with the historical phenomenon⁴³. Indeed, it is well-known that in this essay Humboldt was inspired by a sentence of Schiller’s: «Und doch muss der Geschichtschreiber ganz

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21

³⁹ L. Pica Ciamarra, *Humboldt e Goethe*, in A. Carrano, E. Massimilla, F. Tessitore (eds.), *Wilhelm von Humboldt. Duecentocinquanta anni dopo. Incontri e confronti*, pp. 113-135.

⁴⁰ See R. De Biase, *I saperi della vita. Biologia, analogia e sapere storico in Kant, Goethe e W. v. Humboldt*, Giannini, Napoli, 2011.

⁴¹ W. von Humboldt, *On the Historian’s Task*, p. 8 (*Die Aufgabe des Geschichtschreibers*, p. 12).

⁴² See G. Gebauer, Ch. Wulf, *Mimesis. Culture Art Society*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995, p. 5: «Associated with the physical aspect of mimesis is its performative aspect, as an actualization, a presentation of what has been mimetically indicated».

⁴³ W. von Humboldt, *On the Historian’s Task*, p. 10.

wie der Dichter verfahren: wenn er den Stoff in sich aufgenommen hat, muss er ihn wieder ganz neue aus sich schaffen»⁴⁴.

The poet, the emblem of every artist, thus supplants nature with an expression that is adequate to reality but no longer materially like it; in his words we recognise it with the same immediacy as when we see a flower, even though, regarding the flower's shape, he gives us nothing. Hence the poet works with pure imagination, whereas the historian's imagination is rather a "power" that would be better defined as the capacity to presage and to connect. The historian sticks to an original while the poet creates, but ultimately even Humboldt cannot but relate through his idea that what we call «ein Ideal» is «die Darstellung einer Idee in einem Individuum»⁴⁵.

Significantly, with reference to the rules of perspective, Humboldt takes the historian's task to be similar to that of the draughtsman, because both would fail if they wanted to know their objective by simply replicating it:

The historian, like the draftsman, will produce only caricatures if he merely depicts the specific circumstances of an event by connecting them with each other as they seemingly present themselves. He must render strict account of their inner nexus, must establish for himself a picture of the active forces, must recognize their trends at a given moment, must inquire into the relationship of both forces and trends to the existing state of affairs and to the changes that have preceded it⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ W. von Humboldt an Goethe, 18. März 1822, quoted in M. Hofmann, J. Rüsen, M. Springer (hrsg.), *Schiller und die Geschichte*, Fink, Paderborn, 2006, p. 47. See F. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, p. 267.

⁴⁵ W. von Humboldt, *Aesthetische Versuche über Goethe's Hermann und Dorothea*, p. 24.

⁴⁶ W. von Humboldt, *On the Historian's Task*, p. 14 (*Die Aufgabe des Geschichtschreibers*, p. 21).