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ARTICLE

LANGUAGE—HISTORY—PRESENCE

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the use of language in historiography and with this usage's implications for the conception of history and the historiographical operation/practice. Whereas theorists of "presence" believe that "presence" and "reality" can be grasped in spoken language and written texts, thus generally considering them as a medium that enables access to a "reality" that lies beyond texts and language, I argue that language and texts should themselves be considered as a "reality." We need to distinguish the process of "presentification" performed by words from the presence of language as a lexical and physical reality; though the two aspects are strictly connected, the presence of language needs to be emphasized as a lexical-semantic system and as a thing in the world. In this article, I consider language as a "living witness" of the narrated events; it is a presence in the moment that events occurred and a presence that is still present. We should think of language as we think of the material world around us—that is, as a transformed landscape that contains present and absent pasts. Historians of "presence" consider the meanings associated with language as a major obstacle obstructing the understanding of history in a new unmediated way; to some extent, this article is an attempt to hold meaning and presence together.

Keywords: presence, translation, temporality, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Eelco Runia, Frank Ankersmit

Forsitan non sunt vera, quae nunc nobis apparent, forsitan in praesentia somniamus.[2]

I. INTRODUCTION

The publication of *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* in 2004 can be considered the climacteric moment in which the issue of "presence"

1. I wish to express my deep gratitude to Peter Burke, who has read the first draft of the manuscript, Alexandra Lianeri, for her review of the final version, and Keith Tribe, for his invaluable scholarly and linguistic support.

2. Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, vol. 4, *Books XII–XIV*, transl. Michael J. B. Allen, ed. James Hankins with William Bowen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 278. The English translation of this passage is: "Perhaps these things as they now appear to us are not true; perhaps at this moment we are dreaming" (ibid., 279). In the context of this article, I wish to emphasize that the Latin term *in praesentia*, translated as "at this moment," could also be literally rendered as "in presence" or, with another layer of poetic nuance, as "when we are awake."

definitively came to the attention of humanities scholars. With this book, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht made a foundational epistemological move whose specific importance deserves to be highlighted and contextualized within a broader historical perspective. Indeed, between 1765 and 1772, the French philosopher Samuel du Pont de Nemours made a similar move with his *Notices abrégées des différents écrits modernes qui ont concouru en France à former la science de l'économie politique*, in which du Pont de Nemours provided a history and a bibliography for a discipline that did not yet exist: political economy. Likewise, with the publication of *Production of Presence*, Gumbrecht not only provided a history and a bibliography but also played a pivotal role in giving a name to what was later called "the paradigm of presence." Basically, Gumbrecht was aware of the necessity of providing the conceptual tools for a new epistemological and ontological perspective.

Gumbrecht identified the origins of this perspective in the "Materialities of Communication" colloquium, which was held in Dubrovnik in 1987.[3] The colloquium organizers made it clear that "materialities of communication . . . are all those phenomena and conditions that contribute to the production of meaning, without being meaning themselves."[4] In this undertaking, Walter Benjamin and Friedrich Kittler, who had elaborated the concept of "psycho-physics,"[5] were seen as two foundational authors, as was the medievalist Paul Zumthor, whose "attention was then shifting from semiotics' exclusive attention to structures of meaning to the development of a phenomenology of the voice and of writing as body-centered modes of communication."[6] Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Niklas Luhmann were also called to arms against an enemy that soon came to be embodied by a single individual, Wilhelm Dilthey (who became a real scapegoat), and that came to be called "hermeneutics." In sum, of the organizers of the "Materialities of Communication" colloquium, Gumbrecht wrote,

> our main fascination came from the question of how different media—different "materialities"—of communication would affect the meaning that they carried. We no longer believed that a meaning complex could be kept separated from its mediality, that is, from the difference of appearing on a print page, on a computer screen, or in a voice mail message. But we didn't quite know how to deal with this interface of meaning and materiality.[7]

In this situation, Gumbrecht found an important ally in Louis Hjelmslev, who provided some fundamental elements to form a conceptual toolkit for the project that Gumbrecht had in mind but that had not yet assumed a very precise form. During a seminar at the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro in the mid-1990s, a student also provided Gumbrecht with the Portuguese expression *produções de*

3. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, eds., *Materialities of Communication*, transl. William Whobrey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

4. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 8.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 9.

7. Ibid., 11–12.

presença, which Gumbrecht used as the basis for his elaboration of the concept of the "production of presence." Still referring to the organizers of the "Materialities of Communication" colloquium, Gumbrecht explained:

> First and above all, we wanted to understand the word "presence" in this context as a spatial reference. What is "present" to us (very much in the sense of the Latin form *prae-esse*) is in front of us, in reach of and tangible for our bodies. Likewise, we wanted to use the word "production" along the lines of its etymological meaning. If *producere* means, literally, "to bring forth," "to pull forth," then the phrase "production of presence" would emphasize that the effect of tangibility that comes from the materialities of communication is also an effect in constant movement. In other words, to speak of "production of presence" implies that the (spatial) tangibility effect coming from the communication media is subjected, in space, to movements of greater or lesser proximity, and of greater or lesser intensity. . . .
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> [T]here is reason to emphasize that the rediscovery of presence effects and the interest in "materialities of communication," the "nonhermeneutic," and "production of presence" by no means eliminate the dimension of interpretation and meaning production. Poetry is perhaps the most powerful example of the simultaneity of presence effects and meaning effects—for even the most overpowering institutional dominance of the hermeneutic dimension could never fully repress the presence effects of rhyme and alliteration, of verse and stanza.[8]

I will return to this latter point in a moment. On the whole, Gumbrecht arranged and refined some reflections that had been previously developed by himself and others,[9] and he did so with the same approach with which all autobiographical intentions occur: organizing disparate moments and phenomena in an established order. In fact, with *Production of Presence*, he contributed to the formation of an epistemological field that remained indefinite but that had a certain success and assumed varied forms between the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century in media studies, cultural studies, and political theory. At the beginning of 2011, *Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Presença*, an academic journal that is dedicated to the study of presence, was founded in Brazil with the aim of making the reader aware of the debates around the performing arts and its associated fields—namely, education as well as philosophy, anthropology, and history. In 2013, Ranjan Ghosh and Ethan Kleinberg edited a book that provided the first multidisciplinary set of chapters on "presence." In his prologue, Kleinberg defined the paradigm of presence as "a postlinguistic or postdiscursive theory that seeks to challenge current understandings of 'meaning' or 'interpretation,' or both, and for many this entails a rejection of constructivism and textualism via a mode of academic engagement that reestablishes contact with material reality."[10]

8. Ibid., 17–18.

9. See especially Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, transl. Brian Holmes and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), whose polemical targets are "representation" and "the West"; according to Nancy, the history of the West coincides with a way of thinking based on "representation." In a perceptive bibliographical review published a few years earlier, one could already see the signs of a renewed attention to the meaning/experience relationships; see John E. Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience," *American Historical Review* 92, no. 4 (1987), 879–907.

10. Ethan Kleinberg, prologue to *Presence: Philosophy, History, and Cultural Theory for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Ranjan Ghosh and Ethan Kleinberg (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 1.

Following the publication of Frank Ankersmit's *Sublime Historical Experience*, Kleinberg also emphasized that this movement toward "presence" was intended to be not only a reaction against the traditional conception of "meaning" and "interpretation" but also a move against those currents of thoughts that had strongly criticized the traditional conception of "meaning," such as Whitean representationalism, Derridean deconstruction, Gadamerian hermeneutics, and Rortian constructivism. A major turning point in this trend was the special forum on "presence" that was published in *History and Theory* in 2006 and that contained articles by Ankersmit, Michael Bentley, Ewa Domanska, Gumbrecht, and Eelco Runia, among others.

II. GUMBRECHT'S APPROACH TO LANGUAGE AND PRESENCE

Especially important to my perspective here is Gumbrecht's article titled "Presence Achieved in Language (with Special Attention Given to the Presence of the Past)" and its consequent purpose: to answer the question "of how language can manage to make the past present."[11]

In this article, Gumbrecht outlined "seven modes of amalgamation between language and presence."[12] According to Gumbrecht, "the first amalgamation is *language, above all spoken language, as a physical reality*"; as such, "spoken language does not only touch and affect our acoustic sense but our bodies in their entirety."[13] "A second, very different type of amalgamation between presence and language lies in *some basic practices of philology*," Gumbrecht wrote: "Collecting textual fragments, in this sense, presupposes a deeply repressed wish to, quite literally, eat what remains of ancients papyri or medieval manuscripts."[14] A third case of amalgamation, Gumbrecht argued, will appear in "*any kind of language that is capable of triggering aesthetic experience*."[15] Gumbrecht's fourth paradigm of amalgamation is to be found in "*mystical experience and the language of mysticism*."[16] Of special interest to me is the fifth form of amalgamation, which "can be described as *language being open toward the world of things*. It includes texts that switch from the semiotic paradigm of representation to a deictic attitude where words are experienced as pointing to things rather than standing 'for them.'"[17] "Epiphany," Gumbrecht continued, "is a sixth, almost 'intrusive' mode of producing presence in and through language," and so "*literature can be the place of epiphany*."[18] "Finally," Gumbrecht wrote, "*language, under certain (varied) conditions, can make the past tangibly present*."[19]

11. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Presence Achieved in Language (with Special Attention Given to the Presence of the Past)," *History and Theory* 45, no. 3 (2006), 324.
12. Ibid., 325.
13. Ibid., 320.
14. Ibid., 320–21.
15. Ibid., 321.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 322.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 323.

We might note that this last amalgamation, which is of utmost importance to this article, is not present in the first chapter of Gumbrecht's *Our Broad Present*,[20] which includes that article with a different title ("Presence in Language or Presence Achieved Against Language?"). In fact, the seventh amalgamation is not completely consistent with the other six and introduces a significant turn (already sketched in the fifth amalgamation) toward written language; here, Gumbrecht compares physical places to literary texts and concludes that "presentification of the past through texts . . . would be a non-academic exercise reserved for those cases in which similar objects and places are not easily available or accessible."[21]

On the whole, Gumbrecht's "seven modes of amalgamation" are based on a foundational distinction between "meaning-based cultures" and "presence-based cultures," a distinction that lends sense to the entire theoretical elaboration but that, at the same time, appears to be problematic and difficult to accept in its disruptive consequences. Although Gumbrecht's insistence on the materiality of language is important and interesting, I cannot agree with his total detachment of language from meaning, and, in particular, I cannot see how a language that is separate from meaning could be capable of making the past present in forms that are useful for historical inquiry. Perhaps the primary distance of my perspective from that of Gumbrecht can be located in his preference for spoken language, for its rhythms and sounds. As I will show in the following pages, it is above all the materiality of written language that characterizes the "presence" of language in the world and its functioning as a means of presentification. Furthermore, Gumbrecht posited an insurmountable cleavage between the interpretation of history and the presentification of the past; in his view, we can make the past present only outside time and outside history by means of intuitions or inspirations that take us by surprise.

III. RUNIA'S APPROACH TO MEANING AND PRESENCE

Runia proposed a similar line of thought in two articles, one titled "Presence" and the other titled "Spots of Time." In "Presence," Runia emphasized the crucial linguistic function of metonymy in making the past present:

> Whereas metaphor is instrumental in the "transfer of meaning," metonymy brings about a "transfer of presence." A metonymy is a "presence in absence" not just in the sense that it presents something that isn't there, but also in the sense that in the absence (or at least the radical inconspicuousness) that *is* there, the thing that isn't there is still present. The presence of the past thus does not reside primarily in the intended story or the manifest metaphorical content of the text, but in what story and text contain *in spite of* the intentions of the historian. One might say that historical reality travels with historiography not as a paying passenger but as a *stowaway*.[22]

20. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Our Broad Present: Time and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). This text was first published in German as *Unsere breite Gegenwart* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010).

21. Gumbrecht, "Presence Achieved in Language," 323.

22. Eelco Runia, "Presence," *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2006), 19. By following Roman Jacobson, Javier Fernández-Sebastián has argued that the use of metaphors in history "appear[s] to be closer

Metonymy is thus presented as a tool to grasp the discontinuity in history. With this, the intention is not the deconstruction of continuity in meaning, as done by "representationalist" historians, but the ability to view metonymy as a plunge into the past while remaining free from the constraints of meaning that mark the history of "traditional" historians. According to Runia, "metonymy—the trope . . . of 'presence in absence'—illuminates the seemingly strange, but in fact very common, phenomenon of our being able to 'surprise ourselves.'"[23]

In "Spots of Time," Runia focused particularly on the ways in which "the *mémoire involontaire* . . . can force us to rewrite our stories about ourselves," thus also referencing Ankersmit's "sublime historical experience."[24] The use of the verb "to force" is key to understanding Runia's perspective on the issue; people who experience the past as a real presence are not active subjects recollecting stories but subjects affected by memory. On the contrary, presence is an active force. Indeed, "we do not know it is there, it neither *is*, nor *connects* to, a story, and because it cannot be remembered, it cannot be forgotten either."[25] Accordingly, historians who claim to rationalize history through the representation of the past become involved in a vicious circle and, consequently, would be unable to find the real presence of the past; they are incapable of understanding what the language of metonymies could reveal to them, even in spite of their intentions. "To put it differently," Runia wrote, "presence does not reside in the storiness of stories, but in what a story inadvertently has to be—in, that is, the things a story has to present in order to present a story. In still other words: presence travels with our stories not as a paying passenger but as a *stowaway*."[26] The language of Gumbrecht resonates in these lines; however, although Gumbrecht's and Runia's perspectives display significant similarities, the differences between them should not be ignored.

It is perhaps too early to draw conclusions (if this is even possible) concerning the theorists of the presence movement or even to agree about their internal differences. For example, although I agree with Gregory Jones-Katz's statement that Runia appears "to overemphasize presence at the expense of meaning-making," I cannot agree with his preference for Gumbrecht's perspective when it is combined with Derrida's deconstructionism.[27] It seems to me that Gumbrecht's presentism is more difficult to integrate into a discourse on historical method when compared to that of Runia, who provided some insights that could be useful for historians, perhaps even beyond his intention of undermining "meaning-making" historians. One of these insights is his view of history as an "ongoing process," a view that

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to the dimension of *meaning*," while metonymies "would bear a closer resemblance to *presence*" (*Key Metaphors for History: Mirrors of Time* [London: Routledge, 2024], 16).

23. Runia, "Presence," 6.

24. Eelco Runia, "Spots of Time," *History and Theory* 45, no. 3 (2006), 314.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid., 315. The two articles of Runia noted here constitute the first two chapters of his book *Moved by the Past: Discontinuity and Historical Mutation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

27. Gregory Jones-Katz, "(An Illustration of) Jacques Derrida at the Limits of the Historicist Chronotype," *Rethinking History* 23, no. 4 (2019), 497.

focuses not on the past but on the present; even more important in this context is his consideration of some writers as translators of time into space. Runia argued that Walter Scott, Honoré de Balzac, and, more recently, Claudio Magris, Geert Mak, and W. G. Sebald are striking examples of this approach to the translation of time into space. According to Runia, "surely the most maddeningly brilliant, poetically concrete, and proudly self-conscious attempt to translate time into space is Giambattista Vico's *Scienza nuova*. . . . Most of [Vico's] shelved thoughts . . . result from Vico's ability to 'divine' past worlds in what he gleaned from the plane of the present."[28] "Places are, in short, storehouses of 'presence,'" wrote Runia with reference to Vico.[29] He continued:

> Topics is the mechanism by which mind transcends itself, by which consciousness emerges, by which, out of nature, culture comes into being. This, indeed, is what Vico's topics ultimately is about: in order to find in any "place" "all that is in it," you have to find *more* in it than you *think* there is in it. . . . Vico thus achieved philosophically what Scott, Balzac, and Sebald practiced in their novels: he translated time into space and so created the conditions to account for the *simultaneousness* of continuity and discontinuity. I think this simultaneousness can be comprehended amazingly well in terms of *metonymy*.[30]

Much should be said about (and should be asked of) Runia's fascination with Vico. Here, I limit myself to pointing out that the idea of history as an "ongoing process" and the concept of translating time into space as a tool capable of creating the conditions that account for the *simultaneousness* of continuity and discontinuity recall Reinhart Koselleck's idea of history as translation and the concept of "the simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous." Furthermore, given the importance assigned to Vico, the lack of any reference to the concept of "history as contemporary history" (as developed by the Italian historian and philosopher Benedetto Croce) is surprising. Croce was in many ways heir to Vico's philosophical approach to history. (Croce even lived where Vico taught, in the Filomarino Palace in Naples, which is now the home of the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Storici.) I am aware that the perspective developed by Gumbrecht and Runia is very distant from the interpretation of history/ies conceived by either Croce or Koselleck; however, the latter provide insights that render the perspective developed by the former more useful for historical inquiry, though within the limits I will indicate later.

28. Runia, "Presence," 12.

29. Ibid., 13.

30. Ibid., 14–15. In a recent interview with Marek Tamm, Runia summarized his view: "My own theorizing about 'presence' is nothing more than an attempt to connect Vico's topics with my ideas about the metonymical structure of historical knowledge. In the chapter 'Presence' in *Moved by the Past*, I show that Vico's 'places' can very well be conceived of as metonymies. And because, as I have just explained, places are how Vico conceives of institutions, and because, as I have also indicated, these institutions constitute the world we live in, my theory about presence can be regarded as a proposal to interpret our world as a surface consisting of innumerable metonymical 'spots of time.' These spots of time may look perfectly inconspicuous, but they contain—in much the same way as our genome contains our complete evolutionary ancestry—all the pasts that went into their making" ("The Past Is Not a Foreign Country: A Conversation," *Rethinking History* 23, no. 3 [2019], 423).

IV. ANKERSMIT'S APPROACH TO LANGUAGE, PRESENCE, AND HISTORICISM

As Ankersmit stated in his conclusion to his contribution to the "On Presence" forum, "'presence' is a new word in theoretical reflection on the humanities. It does not have a meaning that we can all be required to accept, if we wish to be admitted to the arena of theoretical debate. Nobody can dictate to us what meaning we should give to the term."[31] In fact, Ankersmit overlaid the discourse on "presence" with his new idea of sublime historical experience. He opened that article with a consideration of "representation," something that was symptomatic considering the perspective delineated in his book titled *Sublime Historical Experience*, which was published the previous year. In that book, the relationship between presence and language had appeared rather ambiguous, oscillating between an extreme version and a softer one. As for other authors belonging to the movement of presence, one could say that the desire to overcome the philosophy of language of the twentieth century in all its cultural and institutional manifestations has often remained an unfinished project, a desire precisely to avoid remaining imprisoned in the network of meanings accompanied by the unconfessed need to be unable to do without them. In Ankersmit's case, too, it could be said that this desire manifests itself, above all, at the entrance: in the moment in which the subject tries to reach the past (or to be reached by the past) through a sublime historical experience, an imaginary direct relationship without cognitive mediation. At the same time, Ankersmit himself feels the inevitability on the part of the historian to then "translate" this experience into language. (For example, in chapter 3, Ankersmit "discusses Huizinga's notion of historical experience and how Huizinga translated his own historical experience of the culture of the late Middle Ages into language."[32])

Perhaps it was this dissatisfaction that has led him to return again and again to the problem of historical representation, a problem that had preoccupied him in previous years.[33] Ankersmit's "On Presence" forum contribution is also dominated by this problem. Considering, in particular, the "parallel processes" evoked by Runia in "Spots of Time" with respect to the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD) Report, Ankersmit associated "presence" and "myth" with sublime historical experience and observed that the NIOD Report's "authors started to behave in the same way as their principals but without being aware of it. . . . [This] blind spot is the myth lying at the origin of the subconscious beliefs and convictions of a civilization, a nation, or an institution."[34] Language, indeed, is viewed only as an obstacle in living the sublime historical experiences of myths; therefore, "presence" is the "kind of notion we now need more than

31. F. R. Ankersmit, "'Presence' and Myth," *History and Theory* 45, no. 3 (2006), 336.

32. Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 12.

33. F. R. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983); F. R. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

34. Ankersmit, "'Presence' and Myth," 335.

anything else. For the lingualism of the philosophy of language, of hermeneutics, of deconstructivism, of tropology, of semiotics, and so on has become by now an obstacle to, rather than a promoter of, useful and fruitful insights."[35] To my knowledge, Ankersmit did not, in subsequent years, return to this issue in order to explore it in depth, although he did return to the theme with which he opened the article and that constitutes the red thread of his historiographic reflection: historical representation.

Ankersmit's ambiguous participation in the "presence" movement is evidenced in his book *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*, in which his goal was "to translate the historicist theory into a more contemporary philosophical idiom," which he sought to do by considering "that the historical account of historical writing, here associated primarily with the writings of Leopold von Ranke and Wilhelm von Humboldt, is basically correct."[36] In a sense, the distance between Ankersmit and the other participants in the "presence" movement can be measured with regard to their different views about Historicism and the subsequent philosophical and historiographic implications of this perspective. As far as I know, Runia has rarely (if ever) referred to it. For his part, Gumbrecht has been severely critical of the "historicist chronotype," which he has connected to a "historical worldview."[37] This is quite understandable, since Gumbrecht's conception of presence radically expunges the dimension of time.[38] It should be noted that the historical perspectives that, in recent years, have been developed in response to Historicism are strictly connected to an extensive reconsideration of the concepts of time and space. For example, Marek Tamm and Laurent Olivier have argued that "the main challenge we face today in our effort to develop a more complex and nuanced theory of temporality is the overcoming of the historicist or modern notion of time."[39]

The origins and "construction" of this concept of Historicism (paradoxically, for theorists of presence, it is a matter of narrativism and deconstructionism) calls for clarification.[40] Most likely, the first form of clarification and "deconstruction" should consist in freeing the concept of Historicism from the misleading

35. Ibid., 336.

36. Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), ix, 1.

37. On this subject, see Gregory Jones-Katz, "Theorizing and Practicing History as the Metabolization of the World: A Conversation with Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht," *History and Theory* 61, no. 1 (2022), 124–39.

38. Ironically, it is unfortunate that "Historicism" is not among the "key concepts" with which Gumbrecht's *Production of Presence* opens.

39. Marek Tamm and Laurent Olivier, "Introduction: Rethinking Historical Time," in *Rethinking Historical Time: New Approaches to Presentism*, ed. Marek Tamm and Laurent Olivier (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 4.

40. It should not to be forgotten that "Historicism" is a word ending in *ism*, and like all other *isms*, it conveys too generalized a meaning. On Historicism, see especially Georg G. Iggers, "Historicism: History and Meaning of the Term," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, no. 1 (1995), 129–52, and Herman Paul, "The Spectre of Historicism: A Discourse of Fear," in *Historicism: A Travelling Concept*, ed. Herman Paul and Adriaan van Veldhuizen (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 121–39. To avoid problems of definition, Historicism has been treated as a program rather than as a doctrine; see Frederick Beiser, "Historicism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Continental Philosophy*, ed. Brian Leiter and Michael Rosen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 155–79.

reconstruction provided by Karl Popper in *The Poverty of Historicism*.[41] As often happens in history, a series of narratives were then erected over this reconstruction, and these narratives ended up further complicating and confusing the concept of Historicism. This is an excellent example of why, today, we need deconstructionism as a historiographical method, for it is just the conception of Historicism put forward by Popper, with the related conception of temporality, that is now dominant. Kleinberg has argued that the different forms of Historicism share the same "idea of progress over time that lies at the core of the Historicist project. . . . The proponents of Historicism actively sought to make their understanding of time and history the only one, leveraging their position in formal education and high culture in the service of nationalist, colonial, and imperialist endeavors."[42] "Behind the claims of neutrality and objectivity," according to Kleinberg, "Historicism is directly chronopolitical, as it served to justify and legitimize political projects such as nationalism and imperialism by portraying groups inside and outside a given society as premodern."[43]

Clearly, recent reactions against Historicism are fundamentally intertwined with a deep rearticulation of the concepts of time and space (with their interconnections), which recalls the complex and long elaboration of the notion of the "chronotope," a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin.[44] It is not by chance that the expression "chronotope of Historicism" has recently been used so frequently. The relationship between time and space is a leading problem for historians of presence, and it is a problem that has been addressed in very different ways and that deserves more careful treatment. Gumbrecht seems to be the more radical in this respect, for he has found himself drowning time in space. Runia has adopted an original approach in trying to valorize the authors who have somehow managed to translate time into space. In my view, Ankersmit's perspective remains the most unresolved, for it has failed to create a solid relationship between presence/myth/sublime historical experience, on the one hand, and the historicist conception of time that he supports, on the other. Although the "paradigm of presence" has more to do with space than time, it is evident that the recent debate on Historicism is inextricably bound to the debate about temporality and to the issue of "presence." In particular, I am interested in that aspect of Historicism that emphasizes that historical reconstruction is always effected from the perspective of the present and is inspired by a circular temporal movement between the subject (historian) and the object (history), in turn implying a constant recapitulation of the historical movement that finally plunges in the present. This circular temporal movement is activated by and through present language, which should

41. I have always considered Karl Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1957) to be a misleading and very poor book. As is well-known, the contents of this book were first presented as a paper in 1936 and then published in 1944 as three articles that appeared in the journal *Economica*.

42. Ethan Kleinberg, "Deconstructing Historicist Time, or Time's Scribe," *History and Theory* 62, no. 4 (2023), 117–18.

43. Ibid., 119.

44. With regard to the ambiguities of Bakhtin's notion of the "chronotope," see Michael Holquist, "The Fugue of Chronotope," in *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives*, ed. Nele Bemong at al. (Gent: Academia Press, 2010), 19–34.

be considered not only as a means of presentification but also as a presence in the world. As has been argued, historians of "presence" consider the meanings associated with language as a major obstacle obstructing the understanding of history in a new unmediated way; to some extent, this article is an attempt to hold meaning and presence together.[45]

V. TRANSLATING THE PAST: LANGUAGE AS "PRESENCE" AND LANGUAGE AS "PRESENTIFICATION"

In my view, a careful analysis of the use of language by historians does not imply any undermining of the centrality of a "realist" and "presentist" approach to history. Rather, in some respects, my conception of language implies a conception of history that is even more "realist" than the conception of history that is promoted by "presentist theorists." Indeed, whereas the latter believe that "presence" and "reality" can be grasped in spoken language and written texts (thus generally considering them as a medium that has access to a "reality" that lies beyond texts and language), I argue that, like things, language and texts should themselves be considered as a "reality" (thus resembling, but not identical to, Gumbrecht's fifth amalgamation). To me, it seems reductive to state that historical text, "despite its textuality, somehow, sometimes, *does* bring us into contact with historical reality."[46] Indeed, historical text (just like other things, including monuments, buildings, relics, stones, and trees) is reality! It is not only one of the major realities available for historians to know the past (more precisely, what one supposes the past had been); it is a reality in itself. On the other hand, to believe that "that" past is really true, or really present, or able to be made present, is a matter of faith alone, as in the case of the real presence of Christ in the host. Assuming that the form of historical knowledge or experience postulated by presentist theorists could ever be reached, problems begin when the "presences" that manifest themselves in the historian's brain have to be represented and narrated. Symptomatically, Runia has appealed to the distinction (introduced by the German historian Karl Heussi) between *Vertretungen* (presentations) and *Vortretungen* (representations) and argued that "in [written] language it is even more difficult than in paint or in marble to denote something without at the same time releasing an uncontrollable flow of connotations."[47]

We should know more about the forms of "presentation" of the past and, particularly, about their epistemological outcomes for the work performed by historians. Furthermore, and somewhat paradoxically, theorists of presence concentrate on the ways in which language can be used as a means to make the past present and not on the presence and reality of language. In other words, they completely

45. Kleinberg's *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017) can be viewed as another attempt in this direction. In an interview with André da Silva Ramos, Kleinberg stated: "the historical deconstruction at work in my approach seeks to operate with elements of 'constructivism,' but without giving up claims to engage with the 'real'" ("Ethan Kleinberg: Theory of History as Hauntology," *Historia da Historiografia* 10, no. 25 [2018], 219).

46. Runia, "Presence," 28.

47. Runia, "Spots of Time," 315.

obliterate the role of language as an incoming and outgoing process—that is, its function in the moment in which we grasp the past (even the absent one) and in the moment in which we narrate it to others. Though Gumbrecht's, Ankersmit's, and Runia's different elaborations on "presence" do provide interesting insights, their central stance is difficult to accept: that is, their collective attempt to overcome the semantic network built by humans in order to make reality understandable and readable by means of intuitions or inspirations without actually confronting that semantic network as a reality. This semantic network can never be penetrated or bypassed; all we can do to "get hold of" the world is to try to understand how this semantic network works step by step, how this affects our brains, and how we can use it. Even assuming that one can have knowledge or experience of reality without the mediation of the network of meanings, the problems for historians struggling with language begin just here, regardless of whether they are engaged with an "absent" past or in reconstructing/deconstructing narratives of the past.

Gabrielle Spiegel has articulated this basic point quite clearly: "The historian's specific labor is to fill the space of the void created by the division of the present from the past with words, language (or discourse) generated from and within the present place of the historian. . . . Inherent in this double movement between past and present, absence and presence, is the constant rewriting of the past in the terms of the present."[48] Fundamentally, according to Spiegel, "the practice of history becomes possible only when a corpse [the past] is opened to investigation, made legible such that it can be translated into that which can be written within a [present] space of language."[49] Spiegel here opens up our discourse to the analysis of history as a translation of the past and, contextually, to a reconsideration of language and "presence" in relation to time and space. One of the most symptomatic aspects showing the problems engendered by the "paradigm of presence" for the practice and philosophy of history is the absence of any thorough attempt to address the issue of anachronism. It is as if the concentration on space and physical presence has obliterated the dimension of time and has hidden the fact that the experience of the past always implies a complex conception of temporality and a "simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous" that manifests itself in the concept of anachronism.[50]

To match the problems raised by the "chronotype of historicism" in the interpretation of language, as broadly intended by theorists of presence, a good solution could be the concept of synchronization, which is similar (but not identical) to the concept of presentification and, above all, is perfectly consistent with the idea of history as a translation of the past. As I recently outlined in an article

48. Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Revising the Past/Revisiting the Present: How Change Happens in Historiography," *History and Theory* 46, no. 4 (2007), 5.

49. Ibid., 4.

50. Anachronism has long been considered as the "mortal sin" committed by historians. Recently, James H. Sweet, president of the American Historical Association, published an article on the subject that raised yet another uproar; for more on this, see Georg Gangl's "History Now! On Presentism and a Strange Online Debate in American Historiography (Part 1)," *Geschichtstheorie am Werk*, 15 November 2022, https://gtw.hypotheses.org/9274, and "History Now! On Presentism and a Strange Online Debate in American Historiography (Part 2)," *Geschichtstheorie am Werk*, 22 November 2022, https://gtw.hypotheses.org/9526.

that was published in *Rethinking History*, "language, in its essence, is ingrained in human existence and time as a means of communication and transmission."[51] Thus, "if we assume that the act of translating is the means through which we are linguistically able to connect past, present and future, then we can discern how, cognitively, every translation is intimately related to the problem of anachronism and to the presence of different temporalities at one and the same time."[52]

We need to distinguish the process of "presentification" performed by words from the presence of language as a lexical and physical reality. Though the two aspects are strictly connected, the presence of language requires emphasis, its belonging to current lexical-semantic systems, and its embodiment with other things in the world. Of great importance is the fact that the process of presentification, or the therapeutic inspiration induced by "presentist theorists" to make the past present, does not impinge upon a passive subject who is subject to forgotten memories. In fact, these processes are performed by actually existing subjects who dispose of (and are constrained by) the theoretical and practical toolboxes that are currently present in the world. The presence of language is an essential datum; this form of presence is linked to a conception of history as contemporary history that was first elaborated by Croce and then developed by R. G. Collingwood. It is a form of presence that involves a historiographical approach that is also close to the approach that has been promoted by adherents of "history of the present," whose main characteristic is thought to be the "existence of living witnesses" for the events narrated.[53] Here I consider language as a "living witness" of the events narrated, a presence in the moment that events occurred, and a presence that is still present.

Though the approaches to history mentioned above emphasize the importance of the present in the process of presentification, they (to some extent) inherit the ontological conception of the *Erlebnis*. Beyond this, I wish to underscore the cognitive and epistemological relevance of the presence of language, its physical presence in our brains, and its physical presence as a thing in the world. This form of presence implies the consciousness that things and words around us are historical things and historical words, that they are rich with semantic layers, and that, any time we meet them, we are obliged to translate those different meanings (semantic layers) to make them understandable (to make them present). We have to "speak" with language and through language; we have to "speak" with language as if it is a "living witness" of the past, and, as with witnesses, we should not trust the memory they represent but try to interpret what they say with the tools of the historian's craft. How could we understand even an absent

51. Luigi Alonzi, "History as Translation/Anachronism as Synchronism," *Rethinking History* 27, no. 4 (2023), 665.

52. Ibid.

53. Rafael Pérez Baquero, "Memory, Narrative, and Conflict in Writing the Past: When Historians Undergo Ethical and Political Strains," *História da Historiographia* 13, no. 32 (2020), 52. In this article, the author refers to Walter Benjamin, Enzo Traverso, and Dominick LaCapra. However, it would be interesting to know how much these authors have been inspired by the concept of history as contemporary history; see, as an example, Axel Körner, "The Experience of Time as Crisis: On Croce's and Benjamin's Concept of History," *Intellectual History Review* 21, no. 2 (2011), 151–69.

past without coping with a world that is thick with semantic layers and without recourse to the theoretical and practical tools that connect them to our brains?

Historians should be ones who interpret this language-witness and who, consciously and professionally, translate it for a present audience. In any case, all people necessarily (and consciously or unconsciously) translate when they think and speak. Of course, we also have a perceptive and sensory experience of the world, and perhaps we could have a "therapeutic" knowledge of the past or a "sublime historical experience," but these forms of knowledge and experience should unavoidably be communicated through language, which is acted and actualized by an active subject.[54] Though characterized by intuition and inspiration, music, paintings, and sculptures are forms of language that are acted and actualized by an active subject. The same form of words is not produced in a vacuum but is the result of a cultural and material history; just as a proper idea of the French Revolution cannot be acquired by visiting the Place de la Bastille,[55] so too is it impossible for people to possess an exact idea of the meaning of past words without considering the different layers of meaning embodied in the form of current words. To bridge this gap, adequate hermeneutics, phenomenology, and historiography are needed. If it is true that we cannot understand the French Revolution by simply visiting the Place de la Bastille, it is also true that this place was the transformed material theater of important events related to the French Revolution. We should think of language as we think of the material world around us—that is, as a transformed landscape that contains present and absent pasts.

We can also think, though with different implications, of the remains, which offer us a transformed past as a tangible testimony to the flow of time. I agree with Runia about the importance of the trope of metonymy, and the metaphors of metonymies, in the "traditional" way of narrating history. However, nobody today claims to know past events as they really happened, nor even the possibility of reaching complete agreement about the meaning of the given facts of the past. We should therefore seek to illuminate the cognitive and cultural activity realized in understanding and accounting for past events, examining the role played by language in the construction of different narratives of the past; in this perspective, the presence of language and the presentification of the past through language combine in the notion of history as a translation of the past.

Since the early 1990s, history and translation have become increasingly interconnected, either by historians who are engaged in studying translations[56] or by

54. In a different perspective, this aspect has also been critically outlined by Anton Froeyman in "Frank Ankersmit and Eelco Runia: The Presence and the Otherness of the Past," *Rethinking History* 16, no. 3 (2012), 409: "Therefore, if the concept of historical sensation can capture our scientific dealing with history, it can only do so in a limited way. It is a privilege of practicing historians who deal with the real material, such as the documents themselves, the materials and the witnesses, and it can never be transferred to the audience which reads their book. Therefore, historical sensation is an elitist notion, limited to the elite of practicing (professional) historians."

55. See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "'Narrating the Past Just as If It Were Your Own Time': An Essay on the Anthropology of Historiography," in *Making Sense in Life and Literature*, transl. Glen Burns (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 54–76.

56. An important example of historians engaged in studying translations is Peter Burke and R. Po-chia Hsia, eds., *Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

scholars in translation studies who are concerned with the study of history. In this latter field of study, a subdiscipline known as translation history has been fostered by such scholars as Paul St. Pierre, Jean Delisle, Judith Woodsworth, Anthony Pym, Lieven D'hulst, Paul F. Bandia, Susan Bassnett, and André Lefevere, who opened up an ongoing process of epistemological refinement.[57] It is worth noting that historians and translators have rarely collaborated and that they have continued to nurture their interest in "neighboring" fields of study independently of each other; this may explain why the idea of history as a translation of the past has only recently surfaced in the field of translation studies. In 2018, María Carmen África Vidal Claramonte published a perceptive and penetrating book titled *La traducción y la(s) historia(s)*, in which she emphasized that "history, as a linguistic construction, as a semiotic representation, is, indeed, as we will see, *a first translation* of reality."[58] According to Vidal Claramonte, "to translate is to interpret. Interpreting is like living. This is the definition that I will take as a starting point: writing history is like rewriting reality, and in this process, the historian becomes an intralingual translator."[59] More recently, Theo Hermans even published a sourcebook on the subject and offered a similar perspective:

> The past lives inside us. It is there in the form of private memories and in the historical knowledge we have acquired, individually and collectively. Its remnants are all around us in the form of pictures, recording, books, statues, objects in museums and other sites of public and collective memory. It is growing with every moment that passes but also selectively remembered and forgotten. We cannot think of ourselves without simultaneously dredging up a version of our past history.
>
> History is about the past. It can refer to the past as such, to our understanding of the past, or to an account based on that understanding. Historiography means the production of written accounts based on our understanding of the past.
>
> History writings and the study of history deal with the past but are anchored in the present. This is partly because all we have for making sense of the past are our contemporary ideas and concepts, and partly because the primary data for historical studies are those traces from the past that are still with us today, whether in the form of memories, of existing knowledge or of material items such as documents or other objects. We look at the past from where we are standing now.[60]

As stated above, long ago, the concept of history as contemporary history (which was elaborated by Croce and developed by Collingwood) outlined a conception of historical knowledge that drew important ontological consequences from the fact that the past was shaped by the present. Yet, this perspective lacked linguistic and epistemological depth, for, above all, it was interested in showing

57. See Georges L. Bastin and Paul F. Bandia, eds., *Charting the Future of Translation History* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2006); Julia Richter, *Translationshistoriographie: Perspektiven und Methoden* (Wien: New Academic Press, 2020); and Christopher Rundle, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Translation History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).

58. Maria Carmen África Vidal Claramonte, *La traducción y la(s) historia(s): Nuevas vías para la investigación* (Granada: Editorial Comares, 2018), 3 (my translation): "La historia como constructo lingüístico, como representación semiótica, es así, ya lo veremos, *una primiera traducción* de lo real."

59. Ibid., 13 (my translation): "Traducir es interpretar. Interpretar es vivir. Esta es la definición que tomaré como punto de partida: escribir la historia es reescribir realidades, y en ese proceso el historiador se torna de traductor intralingüístico."

60. Theo Hermans, *Translation and History: A Textbook* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), i.

how political and cultural interests of the present condition historical knowledge. In contrast, while dealing with language and narrative, George Steiner and Paul Ricoeur offered penetrating insights into historical method; more specifically, these insights pertain to an understanding of the concept of history as a translation of the past. It is especially important to recognize how both writers highlighted the centrality of the idea of "intralingual translation" and focused on the dimension of time in the process of narration and translation. As Steiner acutely noted,

> the schematic model of translation is one in which a message from a source-language passes into a receptor-language via a transformational process. The barrier is the obvious fact that the one language differs from the other, that an interpretative transfer, sometimes, albeit misleadingly, described as encoding and decoding, must occur so that the message "gets through." Exactly the same model—and this is what is rarely stressed—is operative within a single language. But here the barrier or distance between source and receptor is time. . . . The time-barrier may be more intractable than that of linguistic difference. Any bilingual translator is acquainted with the phenomenon of "false friends". . . . The "translator within" has to cope with subtler treasons. Words rarely show any outward mark of altered meaning, they body forth their history only in a fully established context. Where a passage is historically remote, say in Chaucer, the business of internal translation tends towards being a bilingual process: eye and ear are kept alert to the necessity of decipherment. The more seemingly standardized the language . . . the more covert are indices of semantic dating. We read as if time has had a stop.[61]

For his part, Ricoeur argued that *traduction intèrne* presents the same problems as the *traduction externe*. Like Steiner, he focused on the dimension of time in the narration and on the necessity of understanding "Otherness," or what is not part of our own (and current) system of meanings. Ricoeur's argument is perfectly consistent with Steiner's: the act of translating is a creative act that is repeated every time that a "text" is translated. Every time that a text is translated, the translator gives it new life, thus enabling the translator's linguistic community to understand it with new words and to appropriate it; otherwise, the reason for continually retranslating texts would be incomprehensible. This is, in general, an exact description of the work performed by the historian when confronting past languages; the entire terminology used by the historian when reconstructing the past (also in the language of the historian's own linguistic community) is based on "comparable" terms. Using present concepts and the historian's own language, the historian restores concepts and languages of the past—not, of course, as they "really" were, an enterprise that would be impossible, but translating them by using "*des équivalents sans identité*."[62]

Strengthened by the contribution of hermeneutics and by the deepening of historical method in the German context, Koselleck confronted these same problems and developed a conception of history that was attentive to the implications that

61. George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 29.

62. Paul Ricoeur, *Sur la traduction* (Paris: Bayard, 2004), 40. See also Paul Ricoeur, *The Reality of the Historical Past* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1984); Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols., transl. Kathleen McLaughlin, Kathleen Blamey, and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–1988); and Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, transl. Eileen Brennan (London: Routledge, 2006).

concepts and language have for the knowledge of the past. In a recent article, Ankersmit suggested that Koselleck's ontology of time(s) seems to conflict with his historical epistemology and methodology; almost inadvertently, in a note referring to the problem of periodization, Ankersmit criticized Kari Palonen's interpretation of Koselleck's idea of history as translation of the past and argued that "we translate *words*, not *meanings*, even though meaning will be our guide in the translation of words; however, meanings are unquestionably at stake in Koselleck's conceptual history."[63] In this criticism, Ankersmit also included Alexandra Lianeri, who is the author of an interesting reflection on the issue of temporalities in translation and conceptual history. According to Lianeri, "the long-term history of concepts can be approached as history of translations mediating untranslatability."[64] Lianeri explained:

> The history of concepts as untranslatables exposes the past as unfinished and therefore as a task to be realized, a potential to be met in the future, rather than an external object to be appropriated, possessed through knowledge. If the past is unfinished, historians themselves become translators seeking to retranslate confrontations with temporal others, but also to initiate translations of what remained untranslatable and was thus erased and expunged from historical time and visibility.[65]

Scholars of ancient history are especially aware of this approach to history and theory. Lorna Hardwick, who has insisted on the importance of the concept of "transplantation," has noted that historical deeds are creatively transmitted in literary and theatrical adaptations and are translated through time across different forms and genres, which shape the cultural projection and presentification of the past.[66] Moreover, as Neville Morely has argued,

> we can come to understand the ancient world (and any other period of history, and any other culture) only through translation, finding equivalents in our language for their words, concepts and ideas. Inevitably, there is a risk of missing something important, or introducing something new by mistake, but this risk is inherent in *every* attempt at understanding the past. . . . History involves a constant tension between sameness and difference; we have to translate antiquity into our own terms at the same time as we emphasise the difference between us and them.[67]

Along similar lines, Peter Burke has argued that, whether the historian/translator adopts the strategy of "domestication" or is inclined to "foreignizing," something is "lost in translation"; whereas, in the former case, "what is lost, or at least greatly reduced, is the 'otherness' of the text," the price to pay in the latter case "is a reduction of the text's intelligibility to its new readers."[68] In sum, "historians may

63. Frank R. Ankersmit, "Koselleck on 'Histories' versus 'History'; or, Historical Ontology versus Historical Epistemology," *History and Theory* 60, no. 4 (2021), 47n41.

64. Alexandra Lianeri, "A Regime of Untranslatables: Temporalities of Translation and Conceptual History," *History and Theory* 53, no. 4 (2014), 477.

65. Ibid., 496.

66. Lorna Hardwick, *Translating Words, Translating Cultures* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 2000).

67. Neville Morley, *Writing Ancient History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 81–82.

68. Peter Burke, "The Historian's Dilemma: Domestication or Foreignizing?," in *History as a Translation of the Past: Case Studies from the West*, ed. Luigi Alonzi (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 92.

be described as translating the past for readers in the present, and in so doing they face analogous problems to translators between languages."[69]

Analogous problems, as I have argued in my introduction to *History as a Translation of the Past*, arise in relation to

> images and archaeological remains, whose (historical) meanings are represented by historians and archaeologists through an act of translation, defined also as an act of transmutation. In fact, words, images, remains can all be considered as objects deserving the same treatment on the part of historians and archaeologists whose task consists exactly in translating their past meanings into present language. This act of translation is also an act of synchronization which connects past, present, and future, disrupting and resetting time, as well as creating complex temporalities.[70]

Just like things in the world around us, our words in the present language have different origins and different temporalities. Studying these words and things means moving through these different temporalities and being an integral part of them. The presence of words is not only a sign for past meanings; it must also be intended as the presence of physical realities that impact our eyes and brains and that mold our understanding with their shape and forms of communication. In this sense, too, there is a translation of "our present" objects through time. Put differently, there is a metabolization of the world that we all experience in our narrow or expanded present. In this process, language is not only an archive of meanings but also a material transmission chain in the form of letters and other signs that is in constant transformation along with meanings. Language is an integral part of our "real" world; it transforms with it and is a "presence" containing the past in the present. Just as real beings cannot be thought of outside the dimension of time, so too do we find that language cannot be thought of only as a veil that hides the real. Language, in all its forms, is a real presence that we cannot do without to grasp the world around us, which is a historical world. For this reason, historians can be considered as translators between past, present, and future, for they are immersed in the world in the flow of time.

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69. Ibid., 91.

70. Luigi Alonzi, "Introduction: Translating the Past," in Alonzi, *History as a Translation of the Past*, 1.