Genre Worlds: The Discursive Shaping of Knowledge

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The thesis I want to argue in this article is a simple and in some ways rather formalistic one: that textual meaning is carried by formal structures more powerfully than by explicit thematic content; that what texts do and how they are structured have greater force than what they say they are about; and that genre — by which I mean merely the kinds of talking and writing, of imaging and of structured sound — is perhaps the most important of the structures by which texts are organized.¹

Consider the following piece of writing, displayed recently for a few hours on hoardings in the streets of Edinburgh:

RAPE CASE
JUDGE IN
NEW STORM

This very transient and very simple text works with a number of ‘deep’ suppositions. It supposes a reader walking or driving in the

¹. This an edited and extended version of the Marion Adams Lecture delivered at the University of Melbourne in 2004.
street whose attention needs to be caught by large and bold lettering, and who knows that these words are on display because they are tied to a story in the newspaper whose name is inscribed on the border of the poster. It assumes that the story it tells is factually true, and that it is newsworthy, not trivial (this is one reason why the word ‘storm’ here cannot be read literally: judges caught in the rain are not news). And it supposes that the reader possesses the information necessary to understand what this ‘case’ was, and hence what the old ‘storm’ was in which this judge was involved.

Most of the knowledge required to read and understand this text is knowledge about the kind of writing it is: knowledge about its genre. Some of the knowledge required of the reader looks like knowledge about the real world rather than knowledge about texts and genres. But the ‘rape case’ with which the reader is deemed to be familiar is defined by the fact that it was extensively written about in previous issues of the newspaper. The ‘storms’, both old and new, are storms in a newspaper, and the knowledge the reader is expected to have is intertextual: knowledge of earlier reports and earlier controversies.

This piece of writing establishes a set of knowledges, then, by invoking them in a compressed form. Like all texts, this one is elliptical, setting out new information on the basis of old information that is not explicitly given but that it supposes its reader to have. In its small way, this text constructs a world that is generically specific. It is different in kind from the worlds performed in other genres of writing, although it will overlap with some of them.

In calling this story a ‘world’ I don’t mean to imply that it is a complete world, the infinitely complex totality of everything that exists. This is a schematic world, a limited piece of reality, which is sketched in outline and carved out from a larger continuum. It has its own co-ordinates of space and time: a strip of time stretching from the ‘old’ to the ‘new’ ‘storm’, and the geographical and cultural space of Scotland. This world is populated by specific players (judges, criminals, victims and ordinary people) and infused with a moral ethos which brings with it certain attitudes to these players (judges are potentially out of touch with reality and so tend to be overly lenient in their sentencing, criminals should be punished in accordance with their crimes, ordinary people have a stake in these issues because they are always potential victims).
The definition of space, time and players is an effect of the genre which is actualized as story in the hoarding headlines and more fully articulated in the successively more expansive pieces of text (heading, sub-heading, first paragraph, subsequent paragraphs) in the newspaper itself. In addition to this thematic content the headline is characterized by a number of distinctive formal features which set it apart as a genre: compression, the nominalization or suppression of verb forms, the use of large and bold font, and a specialized vocabulary in which ‘storm’, for example, means ‘furious controversy’. In an even more strikingly nominalized headline from a few days earlier — **DEATH MUM TRAGEDY PROBE CALL** — the word ‘probe’ takes on a meaning (‘enquiry’ or ‘investigation’) that it possesses in few if any other contexts, and the syntax twists itself into a chain of implicit causal linkages which requires a quite specialized knowledge of the genre if it is to be translated into a more conventional form (‘there have been calls for an official investigation into the circumstances surrounding the tragic death of a mother of small children’).

Suppose, though, that I modified the words of the headline to produce a slightly different text — something like:

**SCAPEGRACE**

**RAPE CASE**

**JUDGE IN**

**NEW STORM**

and that these words appeared not on a street hoarding but in an anthology of poetry. Framed and lineated in this way, they would be read as a poem (of sorts), and we would attend to the sound of its words and the rhythm of its enjamed lines in a way that we did not with the first text, where the lineation, the spondaic rhythms, the nearly equal letter count in each line (8–7–8), and the internal assonance (rape case) were disatttended, treated as inconsequential. Certain formal features become salient in the new text which would have been disregarded in the hoarding: a dancing rhythm, for example, which generates a certain playfulness in the place of moral indignation.

Yet it is not the formal features in themselves that lead us to make a different generic assignment, although it helps that I have manipulated the text to call attention to them. It is, rather, the different framing of the two texts that governs the different salience.
of their formal features, and of all the other dimensions of genre that are entailed in this shift of frame (a different structure of address, a different moral universe, different truth-effects and so on). The specific information constructed by the text does not occur in isolation from the larger shaping performed by the generic framework.

This generic framework constitutes the unsaid of texts, information which lies latent in a shadowy region from which we draw it as we need it. It is information that we may not know we know and that is not directly available for scrutiny. One way of understanding both the cognitive and the textual processes involved in the supplementation of given information by this broader frame of background knowledge is through the concept of the schema. In the language of psychology, a schema is a pattern underlying a surface phenomenon which allows us to understand that phenomenon. If I sketch a picture of a smiling face (turned sideways) by using a colon and a right bracket as follows:

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you know how to read this schematic text because you have studied faces since infancy. You can infer the structure of the face as a whole from this brief indication of ‘eyes’ and ‘mouth’, and you know as well the typographical conventions that have turned this sketch into an emoticon, the ‘smile’ command in a text message. Every sighted human being has a store of experience of faces which has been converted into knowledge about faces in general, a set of expectations about their form which allows the conversion of these slight, schematic indications into the general form of the human face. The schema is what allows us to infer the whole from the part, the kind of thing this is from the representation of a few of its scattered features.

To speak of the schema is to assume that knowledge is organized, and thus that ‘when we know something about a given domain, our knowledge does not consist of a list of unconnected facts, but coheres in specifiable ways’.2 Genre is one of the forms that that organization takes, making patterns of meaning relative to particular communicative functions and situations. This is partly no more than a matter of economy: if I am reading a newspaper headline in the street, I do not need to have in my mind the

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information that would be relevant to reading a gothic romance or the instructions on a bureaucratic document (although I can activate that information should it become relevant). Genre cues act rather like context-sensitive drop-down menus in a computer program, directing me to the layers and sub-layers of information that respond to my purposes as a speaker or a reader or a viewer.

One could think of this information as being something like a combined encyclopaedia and dictionary, broken down into subsections for particular genres in such a way that the genres of the tabloid press would have entries for ‘judge’ (‘lenient on crime’), ‘new’, ‘storm’, ‘rape’ and so on. Jean-Jacques Lecercle says of this encyclopaedic organization of cultural knowledge that it relates meanings to sets of contexts by guiding and constraining the reader’s inferences from the text. But this is not to say that this information, these generically organized knowledges, exist in some mental cupboard as ready formed resources, since they are ‘not only a body of knowledge and belief, but also the operation that, in a context, selects the relevant information and gives it computable shape, or from a text infers a relevant context’.

Rather than taking the form of explicit and articulated propositions, they are something like an emergent form, the result of use rather than pre-existing it. The cognitive scientist Walter Kintsch represents this by speaking of knowledge as being made up of associative networks, ‘knowledge nets’, the nodes of which are ‘propositions, schemas, frames, scripts, production rules’. Such nets are at once stable and yet, in practice, flexible and adaptable:

Psychologically, only those nodes that are actually active (that is, are held in working memory) contribute to the meaning of a node. Because the capacity of working memory is severely limited, any node at any point in time has only a few neighbours; its meaning is sparse, therefore. However, it can be readily elaborated, almost without limit, in many different directions, as the situation demands, because most nodes in a knowledge network are connected with powerful, stable links — retrieval structures — to other nodes in the net that can be brought into working memory. Thus, very complex meanings can be generated automatically and effortlessly, although at any particular time only a few nodes can be active in working memory.3

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Knowledge nets — which I take to be in part generically organized, although Kintsch speaks only briefly of the organizational role of genre — allow, then, for the activation on an ad hoc basis of relevant knowledges, distributing resources at any point in time between a foreground of active meanings and a more stable (although still constantly changing) background of encyclopaedic knowledge and beliefs. Concepts, on this model, do not have a fixed and permanent meaning; rather, ‘the context of use determines which nodes linked to a concept are activated when a concept is used’.

For example, which properties of words like ‘piano’ or ‘tomato’ are activated depends on the discursive context, which may be that of music or of furniture-moving, of painting or of a child’s play, and again I want to add that these are, in the broadest sense, generic contexts.

‘Comprehension’, Kintsch writes, ‘implies forming coherent wholes with Gestalt-like qualities out of elementary perceptual and conceptual features’. Coherent wholes of this sort can be formed at different levels, but at the level of the generic frame they correspond to what I have called projected worlds. By ‘world’ I mean a relatively bounded and schematic domain of meanings, values and affects, accompanied by a set of instructions for handling them. Any world can be described through a coherent set of propositions and generates reality-effects specific to it: some worlds claim a high reality status, others announce themselves as fictional or hypothetical. Examples of such generically projected worlds would be:

- the world of the tabloid press, populated by celebrities, criminals, victims and nude models; with scenarios centred on scandal, crime and sport; a moral tone tending to be at once moralistic and salacious; and the time of a static continuum punctured by arbitrary events;
- the world of the picaresque novel, a world of sharp-witted servants and dull masters, of confidence tricks, of hunger and the constant threat of poverty, of the road and the unforeseen adventure, of upward and downward mobility, of a time which is at once episodic and recurrent;
- the world of the Petrarchan sonnet, where lovers are constant and fair mistresses are not, where suffering or bliss are the poles between which love moves, where eyes shoot beams to

5. Kintsch, p. 75.
twine souls together, and where time is that of biological decay and its transcendence in love or in writing; and

- the world of the television sitcom, perhaps best organized into its regional variants (New York, small-town Australia, the cities of Brazil ...): a world structured around generational and sexual relationships, set in the household or some expanded form of it (the pub, a hotel), and developing the narrative temporality of the ‘relationship problem’ (or, in a more sophisticated version, the ‘social issue’).

And so on: as many worlds as genres. The concept of ‘world’ as I use it here has affinities with Schutz’s concept of ‘finite provinces of meaning’, although Schutz defines these provinces as experiential rather than representational. Every genre is defined in part by the bounded province of meaning which is specific to it and which it makes available for use.

In the rest of this article I look in more depth at the way different genres ‘systematically form the objects of which they speak’. My concern is with the effects of reality, of authority, of plausibility — in short, of truth — that are generated by the diverse genres of human communication. I shall talk briefly about two of the ‘realist’ genres that have been so important in the making of our world: those of philosophy and history. Robin Ferrell writes that it is here that the full force of generic shaping is felt:

... in those genres whose trait is a constitutional naïveté, the trait of the transparency of their own means of representation. In this category can be found genres aimed at truth-telling (like some philosophy); the revealing of reality ‘as it is’ (empirical sciences of physical or social types); and, in general, genres of writing aimed at representing something without reference to the possibility of its representation ... The means of representation in this large class of genres cannot become visible in the text without compromising its realist effect.

But all genres, even those that Ferrell describes as being concerned with verisimilitude rather than veracity, and of course including the genre of theoretical argument in relation to which this article

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is written, work with such effects of authority and truth, embedded in their structure as much as they are worked out in the rhetoric of texts.

I begin with a book written in (or better, writing) one of the many genres of philosophy and which explores, in its own way, the concept of ‘world’ that I have taken from rather different discourses. This is David Lewis’s *On the Plurality of Worlds*, an important and influential work of analytic philosophy published in 1986 as a defence of the concept of ‘modal realism: the thesis that the world we are part of is but one of a plurality of worlds, and that we who inhabit this world are only a few out of all the inhabitants of all the worlds’.

In this fragment of a sentence we can see clearly the two languages from which the book is composed: a technical philosophical one and its translation in plain language, although much of this plainness is deliberately and ironically deceptive: ‘world’ and ‘is’ by no means carry their everyday meaning here. Another way of thinking about this intersection of languages would be in terms of the distinction Anne Freadman draws between the genres of metaphysics and logic. This distinction between metaphysics and logic is not yet properly in play here, because both of the languages deployed in this sentence belong to ‘metaphysics’, which Freadman calls ‘the genre that denies its own generic specificity’.

As the book develops it becomes clear that there is a tension between two different ways in which ‘worlds’ can be said to exist: a logical sense in which anything that can be posited can be said to have being; and another sense which is both that of metaphysics and that of ‘plain’ understanding, which is less willing to concede the existence of hypothetical or formally possible worlds.

A thesis, such as the one on modal realism that Lewis defends, is an argument which may turn out to be true. This is what philosophy does: it seeks truth, without being sure in advance that it will reach it. Lewis proposes nothing more than a statement of reasons for his position and of why they might be compelling, ‘but I do not think that these reasons are conclusive’.

His strongest argument is a pragmatic one: there are many ways in which ‘systematic philosophy goes more easily if we may presuppose

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12. Lewis, p. viii.
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modal realism in our analyses. I take this to be a good reason to think that modal realism is true, just as the utility of set theory in mathematics is a good reason to think that there are sets. The rhetorical force of his position is generated in part by a showing of modesty and by a use of the pronoun ‘I’, which points to the testing of argument against personal experience and an awareness of the fallibility of reason. At the same time the appeal to mathematics lays claim to the authority of a language that has always embodied for philosophy a superior rationality: Lewis’s sets are, for all the differences, of the same order of being as the Platonic forms.

Other worlds exist: ‘there are’ such worlds, each of them fully furnished with things. But they do not exist in time and space: they are neither near nor far, exist neither now nor at some other time. Their mode of existence is thus not that of ordinary being, which happens in space and time, but rather that of beings which are possible or conceivable: ‘absolutely every way that a world could possibly be is a way that some world is’. The force of that ‘is’ now becomes apparent. Lewis’ thesis is a way of saying: for every possible state of things, let us suppose a world that corresponds to it. This thesis is ironical, and the irony plays around the ‘is’ that designates virtuality rather than factuality. It is a matter of definition: existence is here taken to include the virtual, a position which contradicts commonsense assumptions but which makes sense in terms of another language, that of formal logic. This broadened definition is a tool that does substantial work. Beginning with ‘the familiar analysis of necessity as truth at all possible worlds’, philosophy has moved on to explore the heuristic force of counterfactuals. ‘As the realm of sets is for the mathematician, so logical space is a paradise for philosophers’. That is to say, acceptance of the ‘literal truth’ of possibilita, things that are possible, is the price that must be paid for gaining ‘the wherewithal to reduce the diversity of notions we must accept as primitive, and thereby to improve the unity and economy of the theory that is our professional concern’.

Other worlds ‘exist’, then, in ‘logical space’, and they are useful tools for exploring it. Here — to conclude my analysis at the very

15. Lewis, p. 3.
16. Lewis, p. 4.

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beginning of Lewis’ book — is an example of how the concept works for a discussion of modality:

Other worlds are other, that is unactualised, possibilities. If there are many worlds, and every way that a world could possibly be is a way that some world is, then whenever such-and-such might be the case, there is some world where such-and-such is the case. Conversely, since it is safe to say that no world is any way that a world could not possibly be, whenever there is some world at which such-and-such is the case, then it might be [i.e. in the ‘actual’ world] that such-and-such is the case. So modality turns into quantification: possibly there are blue swans if, for some world W, at W there are blue swans.  

The language of formal logic employed here, with its productive reliance on tautology, is characteristic of the forms of argument deployed throughout the rest of the book: argument which seeks to respond to possible objections, to differentiate this version of the thesis from others, and to follow through some of its implications. The language is that of a relentlessly close reasoning which pursues a syllogism from its premises to its conclusions, sundering the true from the false or absurd.

Ferrell distinguishes three main genres structuring the language of philosophy: the dialogue, the confession and the technical paper. Elements of each are present in On the Plurality of Worlds: the dialogue in the acknowledgement of friends and colleagues in the Preface, and in the close engagement with criticisms and objections; the confession in the deployment of the topos of modesty and of the first-person pronoun; and the technical paper in the use of formal logic. As I indicated before, there is a tension between the ‘plain’ language of the confession and the technical language of formal logic, and thus between the different conceptions of existence which correspond to each: the two forms of talk are initially fused and then become separate and even antagonistic. It is irony which at once masks and justifies the conflation of ‘plain’ and ‘technical’ languages, an irony which, like the topos of modesty, is inscribed in philosophy from Socrates onward and which, in conjunction with the display of close ratiocination, grounds the authority with which this book, and with which much of contemporary analytic philosophy, is able to speak.

17. Lewis, p. 5.
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There are, however, other ways of speaking about other worlds. One of them, at once closely parallel to this and quite radically distinct from it, is the group of poems in the first section of Jacques Roubaud’s *The Plurality of Worlds of Lewis*. Roubaud, too, speaks by means of a certain mode of irony. The thesis of the plurality of worlds is a device, an enabling fiction, by which to meditate upon non-being, specifically the non-being of his dead wife. Roubaud takes from Lewis the promise that nothing that is conceivable is non-existent, and supposes that death is a virtual state which is other than the state of being which is life but which nevertheless ‘exists’. Death is a counterfactual, the dead inhabit that ‘world’ which logically corresponds to their special ontology. In a sense this is a consolation, but also not, because ‘there is no transworld travel’, or as Lewis puts it, worlds do not overlap:

One cannot cross from one sub-world to another, one cannot cross alive.

or dead.

In return, however:

you are, are there, still. It is the only consolation.

Survival is too big a word.\(^{19}\)

But how difficult it is to pronounce that contradictory ‘you are’, addressed to the dead woman: the ‘you’ that the poet speaks is the impossibility of which we know that

nothing impossible can be said

otherwise, elsewhere

except by saying.\(^{20}\)

And the ‘are’ is that existence which continues, not by analogy with the body that the dead woman once was, and not in the memory of others, but rather in a repeated loss of being in memory: ‘each time I think of you, you cease to be’.\(^{21}\) Non-being is that form of being that is not. But since it nevertheless *is*, then the being of our own world is called into question:

for so many reasons this world, ours

is impossible

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how can it be an instance of what should
be so that a world could be?
but if there are many worlds, and every
way that a world could possibly be is a way
that some world is
if whenever such-and-such might
be the case
there is some world then where
such-and-such is,
this world, ours, the least likely, is possible:
but reading it on this void does not mean I believe it.\textsuperscript{22}

The poem takes the philosopher’s words, intonations and syntax
and fills them with a quite different force. Its reality-effects,
grounded in the peculiar suspension or distancing of reference
that, within the appropriate generic frame, we attribute to poetic
speech, turns the concept of world into something else again:
neither actuality nor logical space but a metaphor for the speaking
of death and for the experiential meanings of that speaking. Like
the philosophical text, the poem speaks its truths through a logic
that is embedded deep in its generic norms.

Rosalie Colie thinks of genres as ‘a “set” on the world, as
definitions of manageable boundaries, some large, some small, in
which material can be treated and considered’. Part of their force
resides in the fact that ‘these sets and boundaries understood, a
great deal need not be said about them …’\textsuperscript{23}; to speak of genre is to
speak of what need not be said because it is already so forcefully
presupposed. Thus, she continues, ‘the kinds can easily be seen as
tiny subcultures with their own habits, habitats, and structures of
ideas as well as their own forms’\textsuperscript{24}. The ‘set’, the cluster of attitudes
and perspectives and ways of making sense of things, is a function
of the boundaries that genre defines and to which we become
habituated. Genres frame the world as a certain kind of thing, and
we notice this framing only at its intersection with other
subcultures of meaning.

Let me conclude this discussion by speaking briefly about the
genres of history, a broad plurality of genres (Phillips refers to them

\textsuperscript{22} Roubaud, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{23} R. Colie, The Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance, Berkeley, University of
\textsuperscript{24} Colie, p. 116.
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as 'a cluster of overlapping and competing genres, “low” as well as “high”),25 yet with a common set on the world that shapes what counts as properly historical knowledge.

Aristotle contrasts history with poetry by saying that ‘the poet’s function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen’; the statements of poetry ‘are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars’.26 Yet in another sense the writing of history has always been characterized by a tension between the singularity of facts and their organization into the patterns of narrative explanation, with all the questions of causality and necessity that arise from this patterning.

The singular fact is defined on the one hand by its ontological status (its factuality is a matter of evidence, established by procedures of authentication), on the other by its temporal status (it is complete and self-contained, and it is distinct both from the flow of insignificant events and from the present from which it is observed). Michel de Certeau would argue that the constitution of the singular fact as true and as past is the result of a single, performative operation. Historiography’s fundamental act is to take certain traces of the past — stories, bills of lading, letters, government edicts, scratchings on stone — and to separate them from the present in which they have survived. In general, he writes:

[E]very story that relates what is happening or what has happened constitutes something real to the extent that it pretends to be the representative of a past reality. It takes on authority by passing itself off as the witness of what is or of what has been. It seduces, and it imposes itself, under a title of events; which it pretends to interpret … In effect, every authority bases itself on the notion of the ‘real’, which it is supposed to recount.27

Thus interpretation appears to follow from facts, which in fact it constitutes as such, and time is conceived as a property of the object, the past, but not of the present from which the historian speaks. Hence the characteristic formal structure of historical

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narrative: the relating of a closed and self-contained event or series of events in the preterite tense, the third person, and from the impossible perspective of an omniscient and unsituated narrator.

But to speak, as de Certeau does, of a ‘characteristic formal structure’ is to simplify the range of ways in which history is and has been written. A better starting point might be to consider some of the ‘simple forms’ in which the past has been constructed. These ‘simple forms’ of historical narrative would include the eyewitness testimony, the reminiscence, the annal, and its more complex form, the chronicle. The first two of these stress the authentication of evidence over questions of pattern. They differ in that, whereas the eyewitness account tells a story to someone in a position of interest or authority (a judge, someone who has personal reasons for wanting to know the truth, or the historian collecting evidence), the reminiscence satisfies a need of the story’s teller, often a need to reconcile past and present. As first person narratives they possess the authenticity of direct vision, which is why the eyewitness is so important in issues of legal proof, but they thereby lack the comprehensive view of the detached observer, which is why they are usually no more than the raw materials of history.

The annal is perhaps the simplest form of such detached recording. Here, temporal order is given in the rigid and arbitrary form of chronology: the names of the consuls or the year of the king’s reign are the container for a series of events which may have no other necessary relationship than this shared period of occurrence. Yet with even the simplest annal the stories begin to swell beyond this border to encompass other narrative forms. This is the story of Thomas a Becket from Capgrave’s mid 15th-century Chronicle of England:

In the VII. yere of Herry deied Theobald bishopp of Cauttirbury; and Thomas, the Kyngis Chauncelere, entred into that benefice. Aftir that fel gret strif betwix him and the Kyng for liberty of the Cherch; for whch first was the bishopp exiled, and many wrongis do to him and to his kyn. Thanne cam he hom ageyn, and was killid, as alle the nacion knowith; and this was in the yere of oure Lord a M.CLXX."

The narrative of Becket’s tenure of the bishopric covers a period of nine years, but this period is presented as though it belonged to a single entry in either one of the organizing chronologies — the

years of the king’s reign, or *anno domini*. The narrative is an incoherent mix of seriality (‘after … thanne’) and causality (‘for whech’), together with moral commentary (‘many wrongis’) and appeal to consensual knowledge. Here, by contrast, is a narrative of great temporal and causal complexity, the second paragraph of Tacitus’ *Annals*:

When after the destruction of Brutus and Cassius there was no longer any army of the commonwealth, when Pompeius was crushed in Sicily, and when, with Lepidus pushed aside and Antonius slain, even the Julian faction had only Caesar left to lead it, then, dropping the title of triumvir, and giving out that he was a consul, and was satisfied with a tribune’s authority for the protection of the people, Augustus won over the soldiers with gifts, the populace with cheap corn, and all men with the sweets of repose, and so grew greater by degrees, while he concentrated in himself the functions of the Senate, the magistrates, and the laws. He was wholly unopposed, for the boldest spirits had fallen in battle, or in the proscription, while the remaining nobles, the readier they were to be slaves, were raised the higher by wealth and promotion, so that, aggrandised by revolution, they preferred the safety of the present to the dangerous past.29

The structure of the syntax in the first sentence (‘When ... when ... and when ... then’; Tacitus’ Latin, after an initial ‘postquam’, uses a set of terse ablative absolutes) pulls together three times: that of the battles and deaths of the civil wars; a subsequent state of affairs in which ‘there was no longer any army’ and the Julian faction had no other leader; and the time of Augustus’ actions as a result of this state. These interwoven times move from past to present, the second sentence reversing this temporal direction, moving from the present to the past then back again. In addition, there is a third, unstated order of time at work here, that of the narration. In each of the times described a series of facts is drawn together to form an account of a state of affairs, and these states are then linked in causal chains. The first chain leads from the defeat of Augustus’ opponents in the civil wars to the resulting power vacuum, the bribery of the soldiers and populace, and finally Augustus’ usurpation of power. The second chain repeats the first with

variations, adding to the account of the power vacuum the further explanation of the compliance of the nobility as a result of their weakening and their openness to bribery. The actors here are either individuals representing larger forces (not just Brutus and Cassius were defeated, but by extension the armies that gave them their power), or they are classes (the nobility, the soldiers and the populace are not individualized because they have no leaders who can stand for the class). All of this answers the question: what were the circumstances that allowed Augustus to accede to power? The answer, given in terms of a series of events which produce states of affairs that make possible further events, thus interweaves narrative with analysis. This, we might say, is the classic task of the genres of history: to trace the movements and the causal interactions between event and structure, transforming document into narrative and narrative into explanation.

The critical order of time for the production of these effects is the unstated present of narration from which past orders are projected as domains of facticity. Tacitus does of course situate himself in this present, but only negatively — it is his distance from the past that allows him to write *sine ira et studio*, without bitterness or partisanship. Temporal distance, the severing of the past from the present, is what makes possible the passage from documentary evidence to established historical fact.

From Tacitus to the historians of the modern world is a large step. Two hundred years of historicism, permeating all dimensions of thought, and a similarly long period of methodological reflection and refinement, have transformed the foundations of history as a discipline. Some of the extraordinary diversity of forms of writing over these two centuries has been explored by writers like Hayden White, although his approach is very different from mine. Yet much too has remained constant in that ‘telling of history’, which ‘is filtered through the genres in which it occurs’.30

My final text is a passage from Fernand Braudel’s great history of *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*:

> Further light will no doubt be shed on the question by future historians using evidence of a rather different order. In Venice, which I have personally studied in some detail, I am impressed, for example, by the scale of public building and

decoration in the city after 1450: the replacement of the wooden bridges over the canals by stone bridges, the digging of the great well near the church of Santa Maria di Brolio in August, 1445, the construction in May, 1459 of a new loggia in loco Rivoalto, where the weavers’ shops were demolished to make way for the extension to the Doges’ Palace ... Needless to say, this evidence does not prove anything one way or the other, either in Venice (where construction may have been carried out because or in spite of the economic climate) or in the Mediterranean as a whole. But it inclines me to classify the whole vigorous period from 1450 to 1650 as a unit, the ‘long’ sixteenth century, and therefore to agree with Jean Fourastié and his pupils that the first wave of prosperity was independent of American bullion. To take a single city, in this case Venice, as an index, can be a fruitful exercise; it may even reveal a truer picture of the economic situation than we have from price curves ...

A couple of brief observations on this small excerpt from a massive work. The first has to do with Braudel’s remarks on questions of evidence, where, far from concealing himself from view, the writer constantly intervenes in his own person to comment on the validity of the data available to him and on the need to refine the tools used by the historian. The machinery of source critique and of the interpretive construction of evidence from documents is here fully in view — there is no attempt (as de Certeau would have it) to conceal the institutional apparatus within which Braudel works.

The second comment has to do with the role of singularity in this text. The mention of the ‘great well near the church of Santa Maria di Brolio’, this tiny and locally specific detail in a sweeping argument, is part of a process by which the author develops a claim to rhetorical authority by building a ‘world’ out of such particulars grafted on to the larger architecture of structural analysis. It is a kind of claim to omniscience, grounded in the amassing of evidence from primary sources and the sheer labour that it involves; and it is a claim to truth insofar as these details, like the realist novel’s petit fait vrai (the small, convincing detail), stand for something like the irreducibility of the real.

The third comment concerns dating. The building of the stone bridges, the well and the loggia are tiny events fitted into a broader chronology (that of the ‘long’ 16th century) which can be understood as a slowly developing structure. It is the play of event and structure, the moment and the long duration, narrative and explanation, that provides the backbone of the book, with its interplay of the times of environmental history (or geography), of social history and of rapidly occurring historical events. At the heart of this dialectic is the historical period — whether understood as the reign of Philip II or as the ‘long’ 16th century — where ‘the different measures of time past’ are brought together ‘in all their multiplicity’ in the writing of ‘a new kind of history, total history’. It is this conception which is the object of Foucault’s criticism when he writes of its supposition ‘that one and the same form of historicity operates upon economic structures, social institutions and customs, the inertia of mental attitudes, technological practice, political behaviour’, and that ‘history itself may be articulated into great units — stages or phases — which contain within themselves their own principle of cohesion’. Yet this does less than justice to Braudel’s concern with the multiplicity of historical times and with the resistance of the event to explanation: there is rather a tension in his work between the heterogeneity of the event and the homogeneity of the historical period.

This tension is not dissimilar to that which we saw at work in Tacitus: the writing of history is generically structured by the narrative problems of binding the singularities of events and their multiplicity of times into the coherence of a structural explanation. Everything else follows from this: the grounding of the reality of the event in the authenticity of the primary source, the evaluative balancing of sources against each other, the striving for a ‘unique, comprehensive view of the subject’ in which individual perspectives will blend into the godlike vision of the writer who commands all knowledge: it is by such means that history seeks to move beyond — and thus confirms — the generically specific nature of its truths.

34. Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, pp. 9–10.
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