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*Check Against Delivery*

France in the World: A Medievalist Reflects on the “Master Narrative”

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“Let others pride themselves about how many pages they have written; I’d rather boast about the ones I’ve read!”. This bon mot by Borges expresses the pleasure and pride I take in coming here today to speak to you about *France in the World*, the English edition of the *Histoire mondiale de la France*, a collective book that I was delighted to oversee. Which means that as editor of the book I was also its reader. To speak of a book one has not written, and yet to be proud of it—that is where I find myself today. I could easily explain my pride by saying that this book was, to me, not so much a manifesto as the expression of what history can do today. I purposefully return to the title of my inaugural lecture at the Collège de France—*Ce que peut l’histoire*—but adding another dimension: What history can do, collectively.

And that is why, in the fraught and dramatic context of the year 2015—a year marked in particular by the terror attacks of January 7, 8, and 9 and November 13, and therefore in conditions that required us to invent new and more imaginative forms of political engagement—we thought the time had come to remind ourselves that it is the duty of the women and men who practice the discipline of history to do more than merely pile up knowledge: they must also make that knowledge available to society. As for myself, to be quite frank, my election to the Collège de France that same year put me in quite a singular situation: I knew that I was going to be expected to play the role of a public historian, in a media system very different from that found in American academia.

I was prepared to defend the craft of the historian, but I wasn't ready to speak for all historians. It was of course a way of maintaining an undisciplined relationship—*indiscipliné*—with historical knowledge. Which mean to me that if one wants to be a historian in full, then one cannot settle for being a historian strictly within the bounds of the historian's discipline. History has no real worth unless it opens up to that which borders it and indeed invades its boundaries. In other words, by practicing history in a

specific manner, which welcomes literature or critical philosophy, I was attempting to turn imagination into a practice of hospitality. But what happened next was this: this discontinuous, fragile, uncommon, and, I hope, discreet practice suddenly found itself projected into the heart of the system of public recognition. And so I found it just and necessary to attempt to convert an individual recognition into a collective project and also to take advantage of the greater visibility that I was afforded to encourage the public to read the work of a new generation of historians. This book is nothing more nor less than that.

That said, how were we to describe it? By subverting the familiar and relatively unintimidating form of chronology, it offers a long-term history—*en longue durée*—of the way France explained itself to the world. What I would say today is that our ambition was to offer a narrative that was open, socially diverse, and compelling. First of all, an *open* narrative: that meant making it clear that France, in its form as a nation, was by no means inevitable, and that it is dishonest to offer a uniform, continuous, and directional saga of its formation. It was not merely a matter of preaching an open history in defiance of those who believe that the point of writing history is to close societies upon themselves,

comfort their members in their identity, and reaffirm continuity. It was, rather, a question of throwing open our time to different possibilities, making it clear that at every stage, history is never written in advance. Hence the necessity of a certain *diversity* of narrative styles and plots, of a kind of history capable of springing surprises and willing to resist the drift into the intangible course of an overarching narrative, whether national or global.

But this diversity also had to be social, and that is why we cannot content ourselves with a virile, heroic, and providential history. Did we always achieve that objective? That is open to discussion—and I am happy to point out that the criticism, which might legitimately have been leveled, of the overemphasis on political and cultural events to the neglect of a popular history has been by and large neglected in the French reception of the book, in which the main accusation made by critics was that we undermined the national narrative. And that strikes me as paradoxical, given that one of our objectives was to produce stories that were compelling, which meant resisting the impulse to surrender to the more reactionary expressions of national history, affording them the exorbitant privilege of exemplary storytelling. There we see, without question, a full-fledged opposition to the

melancholy attitude that, in France, all too often culminates in a fascination with decadence. Lucien Febvre understood its importance, and so in 1936 he criticized the popularity of Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*: indulging in one's decline is a detrimental delight and a seductive form of anguish. That luxuriant approach was able to persuade the overall speed of a history that so easily outpaces the painstaking scruples of dedicated specialists.

That is why, rather than insisting on the issues inherent to transnational history and world history, I would prefer to focus here on the truly narrative issues of this *Histoire mondiale de la France*, this “world history of France,” which is a way of tracking back from this book—a book not by me—to my own work, and to introduce myself to you, under my proper name and guise, as a medievalist and historian fascinated by the stakes of the contemporary world, pondering the relationship between history and literature, and on a more overarching level, on relations between the art of governing and the art of narrative—and that in turn led me to a large study of the very notion of political fiction, and I'll have a few words to say about this later.

But in order to make things clear, I'll start with a recent event, which in fact puts to the test my position, in France, as a historian

trying to make it understood that being a historian and a medievalist does not consist of working as a specialist in past history, but consists rather of venturing into the analysis of our more recent past, in the sense that it is still active and a living part of our contemporary existence. I'm not telling you anything you don't know when I speak of the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris, a blaze that caused what the anthropologist Daniel Fabre called a "patrimonial emotion" on a global scale, which in fact tested our political relationship with the medieval past. Like others, I was surprised by the intensity and scope of this collective emotion, and it is precisely in order to preserve intact my capacity for wonder that I strive to be a historian. The historian I hope to be would not seek to extinguish the sensational explosion of a given event by denying oxygen to the flames, by shrouding the flames of any given event in the impassive blanket of the *longues durées*—the long term.

In another book I tried to tell the story of the sensational explosion of another event: the Paris terror attacks in January 2015. I was not trying to explain what had happened, I was trying to inscribe it, not to practice my profession, but to practice what Cesare Pavese calls the business of living, which consists of

assigning names and dates to slow the process of forgetting—*Prendre dates*. That was the title of a slender volume that I wrote with my friend the novelist, Mathieu Riboulet, who is sadly no longer with us. Actually, *France in the World* is a result of that impulse: in my description of the demonstration of January 11, 2015, and especially the fact that the whole world seemed to want to take part in them to make clear that what happened in Paris wounded the universal conscience, or as the young Michelet wrote in his *Histoire universelle*: “It would take a history of the world to explain France.” Those words are at the beginning of *France in the World*: we began writing it in a state of mind that focused on its last chapter, devoted in fact to “the return of the flag,” which is to say, an uncertain national sentiment, in 2015.

One of the few contemporary historians I mention in my introduction to this book is American: I’m talking about Thomas Bender and his book *A Nation among Nations: America’s Place in World History*. While it had certainly been our objective to take inspiration from the model of historiography, there was also a more mysterious question at play for us, as Michelet might have said: why has France, at various points in its history, had the illusion, or the demented ambition, of not being a nation among

nations, and why has the world still not forgotten France's universalist ambition to swallow that entire world? With this object of global culture that is Notre-Dame, the most widely visited monument on earth, such a system of nested identities (Paris-France-the world) was likewise at play.

But the comparison ends there. The blaze that roared through the Paris cathedral of Notre-Dame was a catastrophe without human victims. I was appalled by attempts to rank it with the tragedies of terrorism—the height of this indignity may perhaps be found in the headline that appeared in the right-wing Italian newspaper, *Il Giornale*: “It’s the 9/11 of Christian Europe.” That is why we are historians: to avoid falling into such a trap of false identification, in other words, to preserve the quality of our collective emotions.

I went back to my copy of *France in the World* to check the dates in which we find the cathedral of Notre-Dame: the very first time is in 1287, when we follow a stonecutter named Etienne de Bonneuil all the way to Sweden, where he is asked to build a rose window in Uppsala modeled after the one that Pierre de Montreuil made for Notre-Dame: another way of saying that if Gothic art was known throughout Europe as *opus francigenum*, it’s not only

because its architectural decor is evocative of the Île-de-France, but also because it's a style of construction strongly identified with the French monarchy. We find Notre-Dame again with the Vow of Louis XIII, who dedicates France to the Virgin Mary in 1638, and then with the coronation of Napoleon, and last of all when De Gaulle orders a *Te Deum* sung to celebrate the liberation of Paris. Four distinct moments, then, which in fact correspond to four steps in the process of a nation's identification with the Paris cathedral, but also to four powerful phases in the French nation's universalist claim.

Open, socially diverse, and compelling narratives? No doubt this applies to the adventure of the stonecutter in Uppsala. In the three other cases, however—Louis XIII, Napoleon, and De Gaulle—there is no mistaking the fact of just how difficult it is to escape the seductive clutches of the grand narratives. So, once again, let me restate the question: what role can a medievalist and historian play in the face of an event such as the terrible fire at Notre-Dame? In January of this year, during a lecture at the Collège de France, which was devoted to the concept of political experience, I asked the question “What are medievalists for?” and I suggested: to think through the problem of modernity. To think

it through, that is to say, to displace it, to disorient it, to contradict it. To undermine its obviousness, to complicate its genealogy until it becomes impossible to write the word modernity in any other form other than the plural—modernities—that is to say, subjecting it to the ordeal of the world.

In a certain sense, April 15, 2019, offered an opportunity to apply that program. To be a medievalist in the face of the great and intrusive narrative of worldwide emotion meant first and foremost recalling that what we call medieval is essentially the shade cast by the nineteenth century upon the Middle Ages—the finest example being, of course, the gargoyles, about whom Michaël Camille so magnificently demonstrated that, although they are taken for grimaces from the Middle Ages, they actually represent the monsters of modernity in the time of Haussmann. Can we imagine Notre-Dame nowadays without Victor Hugo’s novel, and are we even sure that we’re talking about Victor Hugo himself, when his memory has been so completely overlaid by globalized pop culture? The invention of traditions is always more recent than one might assume, and, as Walter Benjamin put it, “that things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe.” Notre-Dame would no longer exist today if Viollet-Le-Duc hadn’t reinvented it,

and it was of course his spire that the fire brought down. That is why the calls for an identical reconstruction do no more nowadays than to point back to the illusions of an identity confused with the eternity of the same.

But in fact: Viollet-Le-Duc's spire was not the only feature of Notre-Dame that perished in the flames of the cathedral's terrible conflagration. The building's magnificent wooden frame, dating back to the thirteenth century, has also been lost. Among the general public, no one had ever seen it, and they learned of its existence at the same time they learned of its destruction. It would be fitting, for that matter, to point out a few things: one ought not to say of an object that it dates back *to* the thirteenth century, but rather that it has survived *since* the thirteenth century. Coming from an ancient past, it is our contemporary. This, then, might be the role of a medievalist in the critical relationship to the grand narratives that govern us: identify the ancient part in them, reveal what remains unnoticed inasmuch as it has not been discovered, which is to say, exposed to danger.

And if we wanted to spin a metaphor, we might say this: what structures contemporary societies, what holds them up and together, is something very like a medieval building frame. Because

that structure is all the more binding the longer it remains invisible, the history that consists of making it known by exposing it is an art of liberation. I have tried to make visible these deep structures in different projects, and in particular in a study of the government of modern peoples, dating back to the memory of Ambrose of Milan. That book is likewise in the process of being translated into English by the publishing house Other Press, and it's titled *Trace and Aura: The Recurring Lives of St. Ambrose of Milan*. It adopts an archeological approach in the Foucauldian tradition to plumb the liturgical origins of contemporary governmentality. It would in fact be quite inconsistent to consider that the medieval theory of the *opus dei* no longer concerns us, and that we no longer have anything in common with a conception of power as an object worthy of acclaim. As the jurist and psychoanalyst Pierre Legendre puts it, based on the work of Ernst Kantorowicz, "the Middle Ages set forth the *anthropological truth* of the foundations of European modernity, that is to say, it laid out with great precision, through a series of metaphors, the logical structure of identity, still at stake in institutional constructions combining death, power, speech."

Here we are doubtless at the very heart of our own contemporary obsessions: “death, power, speech.” The cathedral is a monument to power, destined to vanquish death by a certain use of speech. Because that is how I, at least, view the medieval framework of contemporary societies: it no longer merely refers to the obscure foundations of political theology, but rather to the rational layout of an urban, political, and inventive language. Erwin Panofsky showed this in his luminous analyses of the analogy between Gothic architecture and scholastic thought: the cathedral is a system of stops and counter-stops that organize the confrontation of opposing forces. It can only be explained by its literal and metaphorical proximity to the university and the vast construction site of the city. As a historian of communal and post-communal Italy, that is “my” Middle Ages—what Jacques Le Goff called “another Middle Ages.” The Middle Ages of inventiveness of political experiences, the one that renders visible Ambrogio Lorenzetti in Siena in 1338 in a political fresco for which I suggested an analysis in a book translated into English by Polity Press, with the title *The Power of Images*, and which proposes making visible an essential analogy between good government and the space of well-regulated speech.

It is while analyzing this image, at the same time as a visual event (that took place in Siena in 1338) and as a power of its relevance to the present day, that I better understood my position, which I'll attempt to set forth for you now. I am a medievalist, and a historian of power. Not just the powers of the Middle Ages, but also the powers envisaged since the Middle Ages, and from the point of view of Middle Ages. As a result, I envisage a politics which is, in the context of the regime, an art of conduct, a way of managing the conduct of others while managing one's own passions. And I am a medievalist, a historian of power, who has been walking for years with a comrade, an old brother at arms at my side: Machiavelli. Now, for Machiavelli, the *arte dello stato*, or the art of the state, has nothing to do with the esthetic conception that Jacob Burkhardt would later offer of it: "the state as a work of art." It is a practical body of knowledge, shared not so much as a way of allowing the powerful to dominate more effectively (they know how to do that all too well), but rather to make visible the effects of domination. And let those who wish, and those who can, take possession of that knowledge. It's a potentially critical body of knowledge. As a result, to take interest in the arts of government is not necessarily the same as taking the side of those who exert

power. It might also mean being on the side of the force of the weak, to use the words of James Scott, of the art of resistance, or of critique, which Michel Foucault described in these terms: “the art of not being governed quite so much.”

If we are determined not to allow ourselves to be governed, what is it we must resist? Or to be more exact, what must we be alarmed about? I intend to answer by focusing our attention on that articulation: “art of governing, art of narrative.” We must be attentive to the narrative form of power. It is not merely a matter of storytelling, which we see being downgraded these days to mere elements of language. All power is the power to tell a story. That doesn’t merely mean that it makes itself seen and understood through fables or plots; it means, at a deeper level, that it only becomes fully effective once it reshapes the life stories of those it rules. And that is why I started out today by presenting to you the narrative dimension of this book, which has brought me here: *France in the World*.

For I see in it a greater political issue, for the present day. The historian’s duty consists of countering the effects of fiction, but there always remains a fictional residue in his discourse. Does that undermine it? Yes, if you think that the truth is discovered; no, if

you think that the truth constructed, that it is fashioned. Foucault does not focus on the truth of facts but on the historical experience of truth, and what he calls the history of truth is a history of the force of the true. He sees it as possible for “a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth,” which makes it possible to fictionalize “a politics that doesn’t exist yet starting from an historical truth.” Now, those effects of truth, it is not the books themselves that produce them, as much as the debate that summons them up, with them, and sometimes against them. So, the truth lies in the cracks. We experienced them with the public debate that accompanied, in 2017, the publication of the original French edition of *L’Histoire mondiale de la France*. Perhaps we will see the same thing here, with the book’s translation and discussion. And so now it is time for me to stop talking, and to allow that book to live its life.

—*translated into English by Antony Shugaar*