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BOOK PROFILE: *HISTORY, THEORY, TEXT*

Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn*. Harvard University Press, 2004. 336 pp. \$20.00 (paper) / \$40.00 (cloth). ISBN: 0-6740-1584-3.

HISTORIANS TEND NOT TO BE VERY THEORETICAL; they prefer to work with source material, not textual metaphors. In other words, not many have taken the linguistic turn, or taken it seriously enough either to address the challenges or embrace the opportunities it presents to them. Historically, of course, or, rather, historiographically, the Linguistic Turn of the 20th century was to be taken up by intellectual historians; and so it has been. They would still have to make the case for taking the turn to the rest of the discipline, and some of them have been attempting it. But what complicates that project is the fact that even as the turn has emerged as a matter of intellectual history, the discipline of history has turned intellectual history into social and/or/slash cultural history. The new history that has arisen from this historiographical development has taken on some of the attributes of the linguistic turn, but often without the theoretical rigor or consistency—without making the epistemological move that gives the turn its torque. It remains, then, for intellectual historians to take the turn to their less theoretical and textual fellows—in the interest of the discipline in general and of intellectual history in particular.

Elizabeth A. Clark is an eminent historian of late ancient Christianity, and is an actual intellectual historian in that she works with the complex theological texts of the early Church Fathers. She has seen her part of the discipline of history take its socio-cultural turn, and does appreciate the ways in which it has illuminated the histories of early Church women and of the theologically unorthodox, among others. But she argues that that turn was not explicitly linguistic, and so does not address and could not articulate the work that is still to be done with Augustine and Tertullian, among others, work that would be part of a new and theoretically revitalized intellectual history.

Clark wants to take the linguistic turn to her own historical work; but her interest in the turn has arisen from her work, and is in the interest of the discipline.

Working historians do research in their specialized fields, but they ought also to be involved in, or at least informed about, current discussions of historiographical matters. Clark is right about the turn; and it might be said that she takes the turn, because she can take it. The linguistic turn does mean that words do not refer to things: most historians who take on the turn can't seem to get past that. If words do not refer to things, then the correspondence theory of truth can't be taken literally; and this does make doing history less straightforward than it used to be. But historians have known for a long time that to write history "*wie es eigentlich gewesen*" is not actually as easy as it sounds. The past is *not* present; historical sources *are* the only way historians have to get at the past so as to say anything about it that would signify as historiography.

Clark begins, then, by asserting that the linguistic turn does not mean the end of history, as some historians have assumed. In the first place, the turn itself has a history: it can be researched and so found in the linguistic philosophy and literary theory of the twentieth century. The implications of the turn for the discipline of history can be read about in such books as *That Noble Dream* by Peter Novick, which Clark makes significant use of in her first chapter. But because Novick's book is more an institutional than an intellectual history, Clark surveys in more detail the work of Anglo-American philosophers and French literary theorists, though she might have said more about Germanic hermeneutics. And as she takes the turn she does stick to history, in that she always has in view history's particular epistemological problems. She observes, for instance, that Rankean historians, who did not think that history should be at all philosophical, nevertheless assumed that it should be scientific. A little intellectual history of this shows that the scientific assumptions involved are straightforwardly Cartesian. Give this history a linguistic turn, and the Cartesian epistemology is exploded. Clark also tells of the traditionally scientific history being, in fact, narrative. This would line it up with the linguistic turn's narrative strand; but, she goes on to relate, traditional historians, throughout most of the twentieth century, did not attend to developments in science, philosophy, or literary studies. They will admit that the objectivity of their history is based on fragments of the past, and that the documentary fragments have only a linguistic existence; but none of this has had much of an impact on their epistemology. And yet, according to the terms of the turn, if the past *per se* cannot be empirically perceived, then the history as written can not correspond to it, no matter how resolutely the correspondence is assumed and unexamined.

Clark surveys the structuralist version of the turn, and discusses structuralism's notorious hostility to history. Saussure's structural linguistics represented a break from historical philology. He incidentally rejected the Adamic view of the origin of language; he more deliberately avoided speaking of words as naming

things. Instead he spoke of signs, signifying by difference within a linguistic system. He implied that language is just one signifying system among others, that the others were still to be described, and that they would be described by something called semiology. So far the linguistic turn seems not to have taken over the world; but as semiologists such as Roland Barthes took the turn to the wider culture, the significance of the descriptions seemed to confirm the turn. For Saussure, language was semiotic; for Barthes, semiology was linguistic. To describe the world requires language; the world without language still exists (one may say), but is insignificant (one may say no more). All this time, according to Clark, historians still assumed that words referred to things, and that their historical accounts corresponded to the truth.

“The Territory of the Historian” is covered in a chapter that analyzes French *Annalistes*, French and Italian microhistorians, and British Marxist historians. These projects were mostly social history, but none of them took much of a linguistic turn. *Annales* history was a response to positivism, but was no more philosophical. It covered the *longue duree*, but had some presentist interests, and did raise some issues of historiographical significance. It was analytical rather than narrative, but in its use of demographic statistics it veered toward neo-positivism. It was open to interdisciplinary influences, but turned more toward the social sciences; it studied language, but took a pre-structuralist view of it. The *Annalistes* were intellectual historians only where they did the histories of *mentalites*; but *mentalites* didn’t have philosophies, and so their histories had no epistemological twist. Apart from the *Annalistes*, however, there were some French developments in 20th century historiography that did become involved in the turn. Paul Veyne, for example, wrote a book on how to write history, and called it epistemological. He was interested in literature as well as philosophy; and his historiography also includes an endorsement of the work of Michel Foucault. What Clark calls “The Post-Structuralist Return of History in France” involved a renewed interest in the history of events, following *les evenements*; a take on intertextuality that read texts as woven into history; and the turn of Foucault from his structuralist archaeology to his post-structuralist genealogy, in which archival research finds evidence of diachronic discursivity.

Meanwhile, microhistorians were studying the less significant events of more humble historical lives. In works such as Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms* and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s *Montaillou*, careful archival research into specific historical moments is informed by both a conventional emphasis on the elite and literate culture that generates most historical source material, and an up-to-date interest in the popular and oral culture in which most of the “little” people lived. Microhistory has had its critics: it has been found too empathetic, or eccentric; and some fault has been found with its use of sources to serve its

purposes. Clark's criticism is that, as with the *Annalistes*, microhistorians have not really taken the linguistic turn; have not taken on the theory that articulates the turn, with its epistemological implications for all historical work.

Among Marxist historians an interest in the experience of the working classes emphasizes their historical agency; and like all who do "history from below" they do not want agency undermined by a consideration of its linguistic significance. In fact, a linguistically-turned take on human agency, as opposed to impersonal determinism, would describe precisely what it means and how it works; and would not negate the making of the working class or anything else in history. Now Marxist history was asserting itself against a conservative historiography that was no more theoretical; but there was also a debate between E. P. Thompson and Louis Althusser that Clark considers significant. Althusser's theoretical Marxism emphasized the epistemological break between the humanistic and the scientific Marx; Thompson's historiography described a humanistic continuity. In his experience, scientific Marxism turned to Stalinism, and so his work, in the interest of the English working class, focused with socialist humanism upon its experience. This looks to French theory like conventional English common sense; more to the point, Clark points out, it overlooks the ways in which "experience" is articulated in the discourses of workers and their historians. The historian Eric Hobsbawm is also cited by Clark as a humanist Marxist who insists that human subjects must be allowed to be historical agents, and as one who has more definitively dismissed the linguistic turn as a mere intellectual fashion. It must not be allowed, he has argued, to undermine the discipline of history with its postmodern relativism. In short, Marxist history too has resisted the enormous condescension of epistemology.

Throughout her survey of the territory and her analysis of its history and theory, Clark is anticipating her return to her own intellectual history, the history of premodern theological thought. But since she is also, in a way, telling a story, there is also a chapter on narrative. She reminds her readers that as 19th century historians were turning from gentlemanly letters to scholarly research, they were also tending to insist that the more literary ways of writing history give way to a more scientific writing. By the time the *Annalistes* were at their work, not only had narrative been displaced by analysis, but events of the sort that had been narrated were instead dissolved in the *longue duree*. With the eventful return of narrative history came narrative theory. Historical narratives did not, of course, simply represent the past as it actually happened; but then neither did more scientific historiography. What was of theoretical interest was that historians were writing about the past in a narrative form; and what was to be theorized was the ways in which narrative accounts of the past represented the interests of the historical writer, and constituted for the readers an historical understanding

of the subject. Clark recounts the analytical philosopher Arthur Danto's argument that the narrative organization of facts from the past gives history its significance; and the phenomenological and hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur's argument that humans need their history to be narrated, if it is to be meaningful for them. Historians such as Lawrence Stone returned to narrative because the more scientific historiography had not turned out to be adequate to the past; others, such as Natalie Zemon Davis, arrived at the conclusion that the historical source material that was supposed to be the scientific evidence was itself a sort of narrative. Roland Barthes enters the story again to point out the similarly linguistic narrativity of literature and history; and Hayden White follows to tell of narrative history's linguistic metahistory. But, Clark again concludes, though White is an historian, most other historians have not paid much attention to his work.

Hayden White is often thought of as a sort of New Intellectual Historian. Before finally arriving at her own new intellectual history, Clark surveys the old intellectual history, beginning with A. O. Lovejoy and R. G. Collingwood. She does not really dispute the outdatedness of Lovejoy's *History of Ideas*, but Collingwood she considers to have in some ways anticipated a linguistically-turned intellectual history. According to Collingwood, historians are not perceivers of historical facts but re-thinkers of historical thoughts; and historical thinking is always informed by a current interest in historiographical matters. Still, those whose intellectual history has turned more social or cultural tend not to think much of the theory in which the linguistic turn is currently articulated. Again, Clark thinks that they should be, if not "turned," then "attuned" to the turn, or at least "attentive" to it, to use her locutions. Here she turns to hermeneutics; and discusses the historicity of horizons, and the effectiveness of their fusion, in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. His concept of "Effective History" is, in a word, linguistic. Similarly, the Germanic *History of Concepts* can be understood as a linguistically-turned version of the older *History of Ideas*. The history of this idea in France can be read in the work of Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, and Roger Chartier. In the case of Foucault, the question has never been whether his work is turned, but whether it can be called historical. Clark argues that his archaeology of knowledge is a new history of ideas, and that his work with words and things is not referential but discursive. A Foucauldian discourse is not simply a structural language, but is a complex of historical practices. Foucault's turn from archaeology to genealogy involves bodies, but the work is no less linguistic—there is no turning back on that. Michel de Certeau is critical of Foucault's work at several points, but his intellectual history is "attuned" to the turn, and so involves some observations that most historians should be able to go along with. All historians, he says, have a theory of history, whether they acknowledge it or not. All history takes place in

the present, because the past is, literally, gone. The past can be said to speak, but only when it is written. And when historians write history they should pay attention not only to what they are writing about, but also to how they go about writing. Roger Chartier is another intellectual historian who has been involved in the historiography of the turn, and who in his historical work works with texts. But Clark questions whether he has actually taken the turn, because he has expressed a concern that historians such as Hayden White have taken it too far. Chartier's work with texts compels him to reject—but apparently not to deconstruct—the dichotomies that traditionally inform textual work; but he insists on maintaining the traditional one between the linguistic and the real. In this way Clark comes to Dominic LaCapra, an old-fashioned new intellectual historian whose close and profound attention to the linguistic turn has articulated a turned take on texts that she will finally take to the texts of antiquity.

And so, after a penultimate chapter in which she turns to and surveys the recent historiography about the traditional dichotomy of text and context, she arrives at last at her new intellectual history of late ancient Christianity. She recapitulates her position as a linguistically-turned intellectual historian, citing again the various theorists she has already surveyed. She observes that late ancient Christian studies went straight from a theological to a sociological focus, without taking a linguistic turn. She argues, though, that her field works with texts that are especially amenable to the turn. Again, the sociological or socio-cultural work that has been done has done some good; but without taking the linguistic turn it can't really comprehend the textual complexities of Patristics.

Clark points out that many of the theorists involved in the turn have taken an interest in the texts of Christian antiquity. At the same time, and probably because this in itself would not convince many historians of the period to take an interest in the turn, she addresses the question that is much more likely to occur to them: just what sort of history do linguistically-turned historians do? Here Clark turns to the work of Gabrielle Spiegel, whose "social logic of the text" as applied to medieval history would seem to confirm and complement Clark's linguistically-turned late ancient history. In fact, though, Clark is critical of Spiegel for not taking the turn all the way, or for wanting to have it both ways. According to Clark, Spiegel acknowledges the discursive construction of reality, but resists the implication that a history of that reality is made only of its textuality. In other words, the social logic of the text is more social than textual. It is valuable and useful as socially-informed as opposed to linguistically-turned intellectual history, and so Clark does make use of it; but her project takes the turn further, and does not take it back.

Clark takes the turn to antiquity by first observing that in the time of the turn most ancient historians are classicists—that is, they already approach history by way of the language in which it is written. She observes further that the historians of antiquity were writers of a kind of literature. And then the historical writing of late ancient Christianity was less conventional than the pagan historiography that had developed to that point. All this is by way of demonstrating late ancient Christianity's turn-worthiness. When Clark comes to read the patristic texts, she argues in various ways and in exemplary detail that it can't make much sense to read them as if their words simply referred to an anterior antiquity. This is not your father's Patristics. Clark describes, for example, the ways in which a patristic text involves the author function, is put into or comes out of context, contains aporias, and deploys metaphors. She turns an ideology critique upon Clement of Alexandria, and discourses upon the representation of women by Jerome, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine of Hippo. In some of this she is summarizing some of her own earlier work. She concludes this work by applying postcolonialism to the early Christian late Roman Empire. Here she surveys the contributions of several scholars to the historiography of the topic. In the end, out of her survey there emerges the significance of this historical theoretical text. Historians of religious culture who are at all inclined to consider the linguistic exigencies of their discipline, should read Elizabeth Clark's book.

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