

## RELAXING THE REFLEXES: REFLECTIONS ON HERODOTUS' "HISTORICAL TRUTH"

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### Opsomming

**"Ontspanning van die Reflekse: Historiese Waarhede, Antiek of Postmodern?":** Een van die mees kontensieuse vraagstukke onder historici wentel tans om die geldigheid van "postmoderne" historiese teorie en praktyk (en by uitstek, anti-fondasionalisme en die daaruit vloeiende ontkenning van die in-beginsel moontlikheid van waarheid in Geskiedenis). Hierdie artikel beoog 'n eerste stap in 'n ondersoek of hierdie waarheidsbeskouing, binne die konteks van Geskiedenis, werklik radikaal is, of bloot die retoriek van 'n "nuwe konserwatisme". Die benadering wat gevolg is, behels 'n analise van die praktiese waarheidsbeskouing en die rol van "navorsing" in die werk van die vroegste Westerse historikus: Herodotus van Halikarnassus, binne die toepaslike intellektuele konteks. Hieruit blyk dit dat Herodotus se waarheidsaansprake nóg absoluut nóg fundamentalisties was nie, maar eerder op metodologiese gronde berus het, wat die sentrale rol van navorsing in Geskiedenis beklemtoon. Ter afsluiting word voorgestel dat, binne die konteks van Geskiedenis, "postmoderne" en klassieke waarheidsbeskouings eerder retories as konseptueel verskil. Die kwessie van die rol en plek van navorsing en metodologie in Geskiedenis is egter veel belangriker. "Postmoderniste" wat deur die gevestigde historiese gemeenskap ernstig opgeneem wil word, sal aan hierdie dimensie van hulle werk besondere aandag moet skenk.

"The historian is the ghostwriter of the past."  
(Leonard Krieger<sup>1</sup>)

### Historians and "Postmodernism"

Most historians dislike the suggestion that what they write is just another kind of Literature. Even if one uses a more tactful or obscure formulation, such as suggesting that poetics is an unavoidable and even a highly desirable element of History, or that historiography is a unique genre of Literature, the thought still tends to evoke an angry knee-jerk reaction. In some circles, and for much the same reason, the terms "postmodern" and "antifoundationalism" constitute the worst of professional epithets.

Historians tend to experience this claim so negatively because, for them, it strikes at the heart of the conservative conception of History as an academic or "scientific" endeavour designed to discover and report The Truth about the Past. Even worse, in the opinion of some historians, equating History with any form of Literature impugns its unique identity, implying (in their minds) that there is really no difference between History and Fiction. Historians tend to be highly sensitive to the expression of doubts on the validity of the truth claim of their discipline which, as we shall see, has been proclaimed as the

<sup>1</sup> Leonard Krieger, *Ranke, The Meaning of History* (1977), p. 1.

discipline's identifying characteristic from time immemorial. Against the background of the intense economic and ideological pressure currently being exerted on South African academe in general and History in particular, such aspersions can reasonably be interpreted as a threat to the continued existence of History as an independent academic discipline.

Negative attitudes towards the "postmodern" are not confined to traditionalist or conservative historians. In fact, during discussion at many of the national conferences held over the past five years, it has been clear that the opponents of "postmodernism" include many of the most professional, innovative and competent historians of Southern Africa. The same negative attitude has, often in a more nuanced way, also appeared in print. A few years ago, for example, Deborah James, reporting on the 1994 History Workshop Conference remarked that: "... the spectre of post-modernism, as at many other meetings in the region, was present in more than just ghostly form."<sup>2</sup> At a conference held a few days later, Terrence Ranger emphatically declared his willingness to help "man the barricades on the Limpopo" against postmodernism.<sup>3</sup> More specific criticisms of "postmodern" History include reviews of Clifton Crais' *The making of the Colonial order. White supremacy and Black resistance in the Eastern Cape, 1770-1865*<sup>4</sup> by Shula Marks and Jeff Peires.<sup>5</sup> Suggestively, although they both question the validity of aspects of Crais' representation, the most serious criticism they, and other scholars, level at the book is not antifoundationalism or untruthfulness, but a lack of evidence acquired through thorough research.<sup>6</sup>

The work and reputations of the historians referred to above makes it clear that a historical knee-jerk at the notion of "postmodernism" cannot be interpreted as merely the symptom of a uniquely Afrikaans or even conservative South African urge for ideological or disciplinary survival. Internationally, the notion of "postmodern" History and the so-called "Literary Turn" received much the same initial reception, even (but not surprisingly, given its conservative-liberal ethos) in the opulent security of the Ivy League. The publication of Peter Novick's (admittedly provocative) study of the historical and ideological situatedness of the American historical profession,<sup>7</sup> for instance, evoked a storm of protest.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Deborah James, "State's Right versus People's Rights", *South African Historical Journal*, 32 (May 1995), p. 180.

<sup>3</sup> Remark made during discussion at the 15th Biennial Conference of the South African Historical Society: "The Written Past in Transforming Society", Rhodes University, Grahamstown, 2-5 July, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> See various reviews in "Book Feature Clifton Crais's *The making of the colonial order*" in *South African Historical Journal*, 28 (May 1993), pp. 309 - 321.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *Ibid.*, pp. 314, 315 - 316, 317 - 318, 319 - 320. In her review, Susan Newton-King states: "My plea ...is for more evidence, greater detail, a better marriage of general theory and archival data." (*Ibid.*, p. 323).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Novick, *That noble dream? The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (1988).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the proceedings of an A. H. A. panel discussion in *American Historical Review*, 96, 3 (June 1991), pp. 675 - 708.

In her inimitably vituperative way, Gertrude Himmelfarb has also produced an unintentionally entertaining attack on "postmodern" History under the evocative title: *On looking into the Abyss Untimely thoughts on culture and society*.<sup>9</sup> In her view, "postmodern" historians are: "... historians who propose to 'demystify' (and, some might say, 'dehistoricize') history", because: "Postmodern history, ... recognises no reality principle, only the pleasure principle - history at the pleasure of the historian."<sup>10</sup>

In Himmelfarb's eyes, repudiating historical truth claims in the form of a denial of realism is equivalent to denying the facticity of the discipline and constitutes the root of all academic evil, especially the evil that she specifically attributes to Stanley Fish, Paul de Man, Richard Rorty, Natalie Zeemon-Davis, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Friedrich Nietzsche and various other founts of "postmodernism".

### Methodological project

This essay attempts to demonstrate the historicity and consequent polyvalence of the notion of historical truth claims (and, by implication, the situatedness and contextuality of historical truth) as reflected in the theory and practice of the pioneering premodern historian in the canon of Western Historiography: Herodotus of Halicarnassus. In the light of the implicit rejection of these notions in critiques of "postmodernism" and of the current disciplinary crisis, this seems a valid project.

A reconsideration of the earliest principles of historiographical methodology is not quite as esoteric an approach as it may seem. Granted the differences between "premodernism" and "postmodernism", there are also striking similarities between the two mindsets. Similarly, although, once again we note substantial differences, it must be recognised that, like their ancient forebears, South African historians rely heavily on oral traditions and testimony in constituting their representations of the Past. These similarities constitute common ground on which meaningful communication may, conceivably, take place. Such an investigation may also offer a new perspective on the "postmodern" project and the extent to which practical "postmodern" historiography departs from disciplinary tradition in the practical application of principles.

Contrary to possible appearances, the essay is not a defence of an already largely obsolescent form of "postmodern" or "poststructuralist" History. Nor is it a call to return to the somewhat dated Rankean conception of History as "*sui generis*" - a science in research that requires the use of literary arts for reporting the research results.<sup>11</sup> While

<sup>9</sup> Vintage Books, New York, 1994.

<sup>10</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, *On looking into the Abyss Untimely thoughts on culture and society*, pp. 17, 133.

<sup>11</sup> This view was originally expressed by Ranke himself in his *Collected works* (Quoted in Hans Schiever, "Geschichtstheorie und Geschichtsschreibung bei Leopold von Ranke" in Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Leopold von Ranke und die moderne Geschichtswissenschaft* (1988), p. 115; and Rudolf Vierhaus, "Historiography between Science and Art" in Georg G. Iggers & James M. Powell (eds.), *Leopold von Ranke and the shaping of the historical discipline*, (1990), p. 63.) The notion has since gained wide acceptance among conservative historians: see, for example, Arthur Marwick: *The nature of History* (1981), pp. 58 - 60. This approach was also accepted by many South African historians. See, for example, N. L. Combrink, "Geschiedenis en die Sosiale Wetenskap" in *Acta Academica*, 7 (1988), pp. 1-42.

this view may once have been tenable, developments in both scientific practice and theory over the past half century have made the binary opposition of Science and Art, on which the view depends, difficult to sustain.<sup>12</sup> Instead, the essay proceeds from the assumption that it may be edifying to return to a consideration of what historians mean (and ought to mean) when they make truth claims, as well as of the place and importance of truth claims in historical practice.

### The historian's dilemma

As we shall see, even the earliest of the Western historians made truth claims for his work. In a fiercely competitive and critical spirit, he also took pains to argue the greater merits of his own representation of the Past over those of his predecessors and colleagues. Herodotus' claim rested chiefly on his methodological innovation - adding the dimension of critical research to rhetoric, form and literary effect. However, even in his own time, the basis and nature of these truth claims were problematic issues.

The issue in question is that of whether definite knowledge of the Past is, in principle, possible which has been an area of debate in Western culture since Antiquity. Essentially, it revolves around two questions. Firstly, how is it possible to verify or determine the correspondence to reality of any statement about something which, although it may once have been part of (present) reality, has passed irretrievably into the mists of past and thus no-longer reality? At the same time, common sense, rationality, evidence and the observation of effects and consequences make it obvious that at least some meaningful, factual and truthful statements can be made about the Past, even if only in the form of atomic propositions. In historians' professional judgement, these correspond to aspects of (an, at most, virtually existing) past reality. In other words, there are at least some historical "atomic facts". Furthermore, these "hard" facts can be strung together to form narratives of the Past which seem to link verifiable atomic facts about the past in a rationally meaningful way.

Unfortunately, as Vierhaus points out, there is a significant difference between a set of verifiable atomic facts about the past and a truthful historical narrative.<sup>13</sup> In the face of this difference, it is impossible to claim that the truth of a historical narrative is guaranteed by the truth of the atomic facts it contains. Other issues apart, a half truth can be quite as misleading as an untruth and, therefore, not "true". In the face of this difficulty, some theorists have opted for a coherence theory of truth, in terms of which a narrative may be regarded as true if it is both internally and externally coherent. Unfortunately, the coherence theory of truth fails to deal with the objection that the presence of verifiable atomic facts in a narrative cannot be said to guarantee the credibility of the links that historians must forge between them. If coherence is a yardstick for testing truth, it can hardly also be truth itself.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Hermann von der Dunk, "Die historische Darstellung bei Ranke: Literatur und Wissenschaft" in Mommsen (ed.), *Leopold von Ranke*, p. 133.

<sup>13</sup> Rudolf Vierhaus, "Leopold Von Ranke Geschichtsschreibung zwischen Wissenschaft und Kunst" in *Historische Zeitschrift*, 244 (1987), pp. 288 - 289.

<sup>14</sup> J. O. Urmson (ed.), *The concise Encyclopedia of Western philosophy and philosophers*, (1985), p. 284.

The second question is whether a binary opposition of "fact" and "interpretation" in the search for truth about either the Past or the Present can honestly be defended. In other words, is it really possible to offer a truthful (or even a complete factual) account of the Past (or, for that matter, the Present) without the intrusion of interpretation or value judgements in any form? Indeed, if it were possible, would it be desirable and would it actually further the quest for "truth"? Is "truth", in fact, a value-free concept? In practical terms, this is the question of whether it is possible to represent *in the present* the "truth" about Apartheid, the Holocaust or the Gulags without using contemporary moral-judgemental or value-laden terms such as "atrocious", "genocide", "oppression", "human rights" and so on. Would it, for example, be a *true* representation of the Past or a falsification of History to write about the *passing away* of Jews at Auschwitz?<sup>15</sup> The answer to this must surely raise the further question of whether, in fact, "truth" is not a contextual, temporally situated and value-laden concept.

Over the years, these issues have been debated at length and from a variety of perspectives.<sup>16</sup> The problems they raise are common knowledge and there is little likelihood that they will ever be finally resolved. In the light of the possibly value-laden and consequent "subjective" nature of "truth", perhaps the most satisfactory compromise is to reject the opposition of historical truth and falsehood in favour of evaluating the adequacy of a narrative in terms of the contents of available sources.<sup>17</sup> Fortunately, considering the merits of the various approaches to historical truth falls outside the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, the question of what should be regarded as "historically true" has far-reaching practical implications for History as an academic discipline and for social life in general: under what circumstances are we justified in claiming that a representation of past (or even present) reality is "true"?

Although historians have traditionally claimed to research and report the "truth" about the Past, it is obvious that the products of their endeavours have, over the centuries, shown considerable variation, in aim, content and reliability. This suggests two possibilities. One is that past historians were wrong to make truth claims, since, considered from the perspective of the present and with the benefit of hindsight, what they wrote now often appears to have been blatantly untrue, seriously flawed, incomplete or sadly misguided.<sup>18</sup> Viewed in this light, it is hard to justify the practice of according the historical truth claims of the present a privileged status outside of our own

<sup>15</sup> In fact, even the term "to pass away" is value laden and thus already an interpretation of reality, rather than a "plain fact". For a discussion on the value laden nature of language and thus the impossibility of communication that is not preceded and followed by interpretation, see R. F. Atkinson, *Knowledge and explanation in History an Introduction to the philosophy of History* (1978), pp. 191 - 192.; Michael Stanford, *A companion to the study of History* (1994), pp. 80 - 83; etc.

<sup>16</sup> This debate appears in one form or another in almost every book on Historical Theory. Examples that might be referred to include: Atkinson, *Knowledge and explanation in History*, pp. 39 - 68, 188 - 198; Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, (1991), pp. 1 -20, 28 - 36; Stanford, *Study of History*, pp. 109 - 131; etc.

<sup>17</sup> See Thomas Newport, "Zum Problem der Objektivität bei Ranke" in Mommsen (ed.), *Leopold von Ranke*, p. 218.

<sup>18</sup> See Arthur C. Danto *Narration and knowledge*, (1985), pp. 148-152. For an example of the role of hindsight in reaching "true" appreciations of the significance of events, see Stanford, *Study of History*, p.23.

immediate temporal context. Experience suggests that the discoveries and hindsight of future generations may just as easily bring present historical "truth" into disrepute as they have the historical truths of the Past. Alternatively, and more plausibly, the notion of "historical truth" and its place in historiography may be conceptualized as a narrative, varying according to changing interests, values and knowledge from culture to culture, age to age, and even from historian to historian. This seems a more reasonable practice as the concept "truth" is not, in itself, value-free.<sup>19</sup> In consequence, the concept: "historical truth", itself possesses the quality of "historicity" and is subject to change through time.<sup>20</sup> The most suitable way of testing this claim is to consider the way in which past historians practically understood and claimed to achieve historical truth within their particular historical contexts.

### Herodotus' challenge - resuscitating the recent past

Although he was not the first to attempt an account dealing with the Past, the Greek historian, Herodotus of Halicarnassus (c.484-425 B.C.), is generally acknowledged, both popularly and by historians, as the "Father of History" in the West.<sup>21</sup> This is because he is the first individual known to us who actually undertook research with the aim of producing an accurate prose representation of aspects of the Past. Methodologically, his project was, as we shall see, conducted entirely in line with the Greek word to which our word "History" can be related - *historia* - which, perhaps significantly, is literally translated as: "knowledge or learning obtained by enquiry".<sup>22</sup> While etymology may not be a reliable guide to the nature of concepts, in this case it seems significant that Herodotus went to considerable lengths to use the word "*historia*" to distinguish his works from such predecessors as Homer and Hecataeus. This distinction between History and Fictional Literature (and, for that matter, "Faction") became established and continued more or less unchallenged until the advent of "postmodernism".

When method designates a class of literary works, it is obvious that the activity described is the sine qua non of the genre, a necessary condition of composition.<sup>23</sup>

This distinction between the great Classical epics and History is particularly significant since (like Homer) Herodotus, whose work is entitled "*the History*" (*Historia*) did not, himself, explicitly proclaim his aim to be reporting the "truth" about the Past. Instead, his direct claim was that he was reporting the results of research: "I, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, am here setting forth my history [*historia*], that time may not draw the colour from what man has brought into being, nor those great and wonderful deeds,

<sup>19</sup> Urmson (ed.), *Western philosophy and philosophers*, pp. 284 - 285.

<sup>20</sup> See John Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness or the remembered past* (1985), pp. xxix - xxx.

<sup>21</sup> Arnaldo Momigliano, *The classical foundations of modern Historiography*, (1990), p. 39. See also Ernst Breisach, *Historiography, Ancient Medieval & Modern* (1982), p. 18; Jay Bregman, "Herodotus" in CD ROM version of *Microsoft Encarta*, (Microsoft, 1994); etc.

<sup>22</sup> Ernest Klein, *A comprehensive etymological dictionary of the English language* (1986), p. 348. Over time, the emphasis seems to have shifted from method of composition to content, as the Latin word: "*historia*" means "story".

<sup>23</sup> Charles William Fornara, *The nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome* (1983), p. 47.

manifested by both Greeks and barbarians, fail of their report ..."<sup>24</sup> In fact, there is a truth claim implicit in this stated aim. Granted, Herodotus explicitly denies any attempt to represent the whole truth about the entire Past, but this is only problematic from the perspective of an absolutist conception of truth. More significantly, Herodotus explicitly states his intention to be the preservation of certain specified aspects of the Past (the noteworthy deeds and achievements of humankind) - in all the intensity of their reality - and to ensure that they were neither exaggerated nor erased from human memory. Obviously, one cannot "preserve" something that never existed and so the notion of "preservation" expressed by Herodotus implies a claim to be dealing with an aspect of reality and representing it "as it really was". In apparent contrast, though, later in the work, Herodotus seems to modify this aim declaring the guiding principle of his methodology as being to record the acceptable traditions about the Past that were current in his time.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, he also condemns epic poetry as a source of information, claiming that it contains inaccuracies stemming from the poetic licence essential to the genre.<sup>26</sup>

Taken as a whole, this exposition of Herodotus' stated aim seems to suggest considerable confusion in and incoherence between his aim and method. The first two statements seem to imply that, in spite of the implicit truth claim Herodotus' makes, his project and narrative are little different from those of the epic poets. The third statement constitutes a major criticism of precisely those projects (and their results). A closer examination, however, makes it clear that the confusion is more apparent than real: Herodotus' wished to preserve "truth" about the events and significance of the Past. To his mind, this entailed a process of critical empirical investigation that, today, we would call "research". As we shall see, given the historical context in which he worked, Herodotus' research was more thorough and painstaking than that of many modern historians. To appreciate this, it is essential to bear constantly in mind that Ancient and Classical Greece was a very different intellectual and material world from our own. Herodotus had to contend with challenges, problems and obstacles most modern historians never dream of facing. Materially, the opportunities for research and the necessary infrastructure for collecting sources, means of communication and travel were infinitely more limited, dangerous and time consuming than they are today. Much the same holds good for the Greek intellectual world to which Herodotus belonged. Critical rationalism and empiricism were only gradually beginning to supersede myth and mimetic understanding as a world view.

As a result of both the intellectual and material constraints imposed by their cultural world, the opportunities available to them for empirical investigation and the Greeks' lack of both a tradition of critical research and conception of what constituted an acceptably thorough and critical level of inquiry, Greek research was, by modern standards, incredibly naive and limited in scope. To these constraints on research, we should add the (comparatively) low levels of literacy of the time, the preliterate nature of cultures, and a world view markedly different from our own. For our purposes, we

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<sup>24</sup> Herodotus, *The History*, 1(1). Translated by David Grene, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1988).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 (123).

<sup>26</sup> Virginia Hunter, *Past and process in Herodotus and Thucydides*, (Princeton, 1982), pp. 55 - 56.

also need to understand the Greeks' conception of the Past and the possibilities for knowing the Past.

In their Past consciousness,<sup>27</sup> the Greeks, including Herodotus himself, distinguished between the "Heroic" Age and the "Historical" (or Human) Age.<sup>28</sup> The Heroic Age was the era of the gods and mythical heroes of the traditional epic poems, while the Human Age ran from the end of the Heroic Age until the present. The events in the Greek consciousness of the Heroic Age were a prized cultural possession and had become immortalized in tradition and the great epics. They were kept fresh in the Greeks' minds through their many annual mimetic religious festivals. These regular participatory re-enactments of the Heroic Age allowed the Greeks to experience it as both familiar and real - indeed, as an integral and legitimating part of their daily life: a constant element of present reality - recreating "for their audiences the unbroken web of all life, stretching back over the generations of men to the gods... All this was serious and true, literally true."<sup>29</sup>

As a result of this familiarity, the far distant mythological past came to be more immediate and so more real in Greek consciousness than the more recent past, and thus, more important. In fact, as anyone who has read *The Odyssey* will know, the Greeks were not particularly concerned about such details as the passage of time, collapsing chronology, the constancy of change and so forth. Nor, at this time, did they conceive of the course of history as a line of progress on which they were concerned to locate their particular culture and time. As a result, they showed little concern for preserving their own recent Past.<sup>30</sup> This rather cavalier attitude towards temporality and historicity is clearly displayed in their literature and formed an integral part of their worldview. Indeed, until late in the fifth century B.C., the Greeks showed very little interest in the exact dates or the chronological order and duration of events in the Human Past, even of those concerning their own *polis*.<sup>31</sup>

This hiatus in Greek temporal orientation explains why Herodotus specifically formulated his aim as being to preserve the great and wonderful deeds of *men*: his intention was to incorporate the Human Age into Greek Past consciousness. In this he was successful in that, as is generally recognised, one of his great pioneering contributions to the rise of History is the high degree of secularization and humanization that is characteristic of his representation of the Past. His narrative as well as specific explanations of events tend to emphasise natural, human, and especially political factors, sometimes in the form of apparently trivial anecdotes with little direct factual importance, rather than attributing events to supernatural intervention.<sup>32</sup> Although the means he chose and the methods he used were, of necessity different, Herodotus

<sup>27</sup> As we shall see, there are strong reasons for doubting that the Greeks possessed a "sense of History" as we understand the term. It is thus appropriate to refer to their perceptions of the nature and content of "the Past" as "Past consciousness", rather than as "historical consciousness".

<sup>28</sup> Fomara, *Nature of History*, p. 7, and, by implication, Herodotus, *The History*, 3 (122).

<sup>29</sup> M. I. Finley, *The use and abuse of History* (1986), p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> Breisach, *Historiography*, pp. 9 - 10.

<sup>31</sup> Fomara, *Nature of History*, pp. 17, 23.

<sup>32</sup> Finley, *Use and abuse of History*, p. 30.



wished to do for humankind what the epic poets had done for the heroes: to preserve noteworthy deeds from the very real danger of draining away out of Greek Past consciousness into the quicksand of time.

The nature of Greek Past consciousness also explains why Herodotus was willing to include myths and traditions in his account. Herodotus wished to demonstrate a continuity between the Heroic and Human Ages that would redeem and legitimate the more recent past by linking it to Greek consciousness of the Heroic Age and locating the Human Age on a continuum running, uninterrupted, from the Heroic Age to his own present.<sup>33</sup> Such a project would, however, be unthinkable if Herodotus were not convinced, firstly of the worthiness of the Human Age (a belief implicit in the statement of his aim), and, secondly, of his ability to provide a colourful and accurate representation of the great deeds of the Human Past that would be both acceptable and pleasurable to his audience. This required that his narrative should be **as reliable as possible** in Greek eyes, given the difficulties imposed by the passage of time and the paucity of sources - in other words, it had to be demonstrably a "historically truthful" narrative - *historia*. However, as we have also seen, the narrative needed to be provided with suitable contents and presented in an appropriate way to make it acceptable.

Herodotus' anecdotes provide a particularly clear illustration of his efforts to achieve this aim by humanizing his representation to make it acceptable to his audience. One of the most endearing examples is the very human failing to which he ascribes Croesus' invasion of Cappadocia. Instead of imputing it to divine intervention or even blind chance, Herodotus claims that Croesus simply made a mistake: he misunderstood an oracle.<sup>34</sup> An even better known example is the lengthy anecdote he relates in explaining the origins of the ruling dynasty of Persia. Once again, the explanation is rooted in a human (perhaps all too human) failing. Candaules, King of Sardis, was so besotted by his wife's physical attractions and (one assumes) the macho status they reflected on him, that he desperately wanted them to be more widely appreciated. To substantiate his boasting, he contrived to exhibit his wife, naked, to Gyges, his bodyguard. On discovering what had happened, Candaules' wife avenged her honour by coercing Gyges into assassinating Candaules. This opened the way for Gyges to assume the crown, which resulted in a dynastic change with far-reaching results.<sup>35</sup>

Taken at face value, these anecdotes seem to be principally stylistic embellishment - corroborative detail, intended to lend an air of verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative. Undoubtedly, Herodotus did include these anecdotes to please his audience, but, they were not imagined embellishments. In fact, they reveal a great deal about Herodotus' historical theory and practice. In the light of what we have seen to be Herodotus' aim and the means he choose to achieve it, it is clear that the desire to please his audience must have been more than a frivolous attempt to entertain. We have noted that Herodotus aimed to write human affairs into History: what could be more human, apparently trivial and less heroic than these two (or many other of his)

<sup>33</sup> Herodotus, *The History*, 1 (5).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 (71).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 (8 - 15).

stories? Significantly, however, they both play an important part in his emplotment of the Past. Candaules' lapse had the unintentional consequence of bringing Darius and Xerxes to the Persian throne, who, as we know, actually waged the Persian Wars. Croesus' mistake resulted in a war that should never have happened.

At the same time, the internal evidence of Herodotus' work, and especially the extent of his treatment of the genealogical, military and political consequences of these apparently trivial occurrences makes it clear that these anecdotes were not simply the product of a febrile imagination. Herodotus undoubtedly discovered them (in the form of traditions) in the course of his research. Since they had the potential to further his programme of humanization and accorded with Herodotus' own worldview, he undertook further research to discover sufficient evidence to link them meaningfully and credibly into the grand narrative of the Past that he was expounding. This indicates beyond doubt that Herodotus' Poetics of History were more than idle art. They were rooted in his own worldview and the aim of his project. The anecdotes also demonstrate how his historical rhetoric extended beyond the form and style of his research report, directing his research and modifying the content and emplotment of his representation. Clearly, then, in Herodotus' work, there is a nexus at which historical poetics, research, interpretation, composition and communication of the results all meet to produce what he understood as "historical truth".

At first glance, this conclusion seems a trifle irrational: surely, the only real necessity for fulfilling Herodotus' aim was to produce a representation which complemented the Homeric and Hecataean narratives and was equally acceptable to his audience. In fact, this was exactly Herodotus' problem: to produce an acceptable and credible representation that remained firmly based on research. We have noted the very real presence of the Heroic Age in Greek consciousness. Given the Greeks' preoccupation for the Heroic Age and indifference towards their own more recent Past, Herodotus' task was not altogether a straightforward one. To achieve credibility and thus legitimacy in the eyes of his audience, it was necessary for Herodotus to convince his readers of three things. Firstly, through content as well as rhetoric, he had to persuade them that the Human Past deserved preservation quite as much as the Heroic Past. Secondly, he needed to demonstrate how his narrative tied in with received Past consciousness in the form of generally familiar and accepted oral traditions about the Heroic and Human Pasts. Thirdly, to legitimate his own, sometimes unfamiliar and innovative representation of the Past, his work had to demonstrate convincingly that he had taken pains to discover the "truth". In Greek terms, this meant that Herodotus was obliged to legitimate his representation by showing that he had taken pains to determine the most reliable (generally the oldest) versions of received traditions and based his representation on them.

The Greeks of Herodotus' time had exalted the idea of "no smoke without fire" to the status of an epistemological axiom. For them, the possibility of a tradition being purely imaginative and without a hard factual basis reflecting reality was unthinkable: if nothing had happened, then nobody would have remembered it. Conversely, if a tradition did exist in popular consciousness, it could only be because that tradition rested on past reality. Expressing this epistemological axiom, Isocrates asserted that popular tradition could not have preserved or recorded events of the distant past if there had not actually

been events to preserve and, specifically, events great enough to resist the ravages of time.<sup>36</sup> Obviously, or so the Greeks thought, the shorter the period between the event and the rise of the tradition, the less likely it was to have been ravaged, and so the greater the tradition's reliability.

Their relative abundance, together with the paucity of other recognised sources, accounts for Herodotus' heavy reliance on oral traditions in developing his representation. However, the authority the Greeks accorded to traditions explains why he took such pains to determine the most accurate versions of traditions possible. It also explains why, where they cohered with both the aim of his representation and his conception of the Past, Herodotus had little hesitation in appropriating current oral traditions without reflecting in general on the nature and consequent validity of tradition as a source. Where different versions of a tradition co-existed, Herodotus followed the thinking of his time and presented the one he concluded was the least corrupted in transmission, as authoritative, without any attempt at (external) critical investigation of the traditions themselves and quite irrespective of their "absurdity" (from a modern perspective). A glaring example of this is his extensive explanation of the "true" origins of the Greek gods and religious practices. Both the subject and the traditions dealing with it coincide admirably with aspects of his aim and his worldview. Furthermore, they were exceptionally well known to and accepted by his audience. Consequently, Herodotus included them as the beginning of the historical grand narrative, presenting them in exactly the same way and with the same authority as his own personal observations and conclusions.<sup>37</sup>

### **Herodotus' response - research as resuscitation**

We have noted that Herodotus' work is characterised by (internal) critical comparisons between differing versions of the same tradition. This was the method he used to determine which content should be accepted as the most authoritative. This practice constitutes a significant moment in the emergence of modern Western historical theory. Considered in this light, the greatest of Herodotus' achievements is that (within the limits of the intellectual context of his time) he pioneered the critical investigative approach using information contained in sources. Today, we call this "internal criticism". Even if there were no other grounds it, this achievement justifies Herodotus' reputation as the founder of "the Historical Method". Where, from a contemporary perspective, he failed, was in not recognising that, as sources of information, the oral traditions fell into much the same category as the epic literature into which they had been codified. This lapse is understandable: to a Greek mind, there was a significant difference between the epics and oral traditions. The epics were relatively recent compositions, creations of the poets instead of part of the collective memory, and not hallowed by direct association with the Heroic Age. Nor, due to the methodological requirements of the genre, were they invariably faithful to the collective memories of the Heroic Age, as Herodotus was well aware. Nevertheless, although he was well aware of the shortcomings of the epic literature to which the traditions gave rise, Herodotus failed to identify those shortcomings in the epics that originated in the traditions on which they were based. This is because, like Isocrates, he failed to appreciate the uncertain and poetic origins

<sup>36</sup> Fornara, *Nature of History*, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> Herodotus, *The History*, 2 (44 - 58).

of the oral traditions and consequently did not recognise the nature of tradition as what we now believe it to be. Instead, while criticising the epics, he unquestioningly accorded tradition the authority it appropriated for itself. In contemporary terms, we would call this lapse a failure to apply external criticism.

If we consider that Herodotus worked without the disciplinary corpus of methodological precepts and prohibitions that, today, constitute "the Historical Method" (in all its various forms and applications), his use of internal criticism - and indeed the general calibre of his research - is truly remarkable. This judgement is borne out by the lengths he went to in order to discover the most original and reliable oral traditions in existence, even undertaking various research trips, notably to Egypt because, he concluded, far more ancient - and thus more trustworthy - traditions could be found there than in the comparatively young Greek culture.<sup>38</sup> Given the difficulties and dangers of the time, this expedition constituted a major undertaking, but one that Herodotus obviously considered indispensable in his quest for "truth" about the Past. In Egypt, Herodotus conducted personal interviews with priests and other custodians of oral traditions and also took note of inscriptions and other material sources that tended to corroborate the traditions he heard. In fact, Herodotus had every reason to emphasize that what he wrote was, in fact, knowledge gained through research (the verb: *historia*).

The justice of this claim can be clearly seen in his representation of Egyptian Social Anthropology, History and, paradoxically, in his account of the "true" origins of the Greek gods in terms of Egyptian traditions (Book 2). Herodotus' representation of Egyptian History begins with a contextualization of events in the form of a comprehensive geographical and anthropological description of the country, drawn from personal observations during his expedition to the area, rather than from Greek oral traditions about, or written descriptions of Egypt.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, in the account, he often applies internal criticism (in the form of comparisons) to the contents of his (oral) sources, preferring one version over another, criticising and rejecting alternative versions whenever they appear to be contradicted by available material sources, his own observations, judgement or inferences. He also rejects versions of traditions that fail to take account of atomic facts that can be demonstrated to correspond with the perceived reality ("knowledge") of his time, to cohere with his general view of the Past or that (to his mind) defy common sense.<sup>40</sup>

In line with this historically situated and incomplete, but critical and verificationist approach, although he uses Homer as a source, Herodotus has no hesitation in criticising him, attributing the inaccuracies he pinpoints in the *Odyssey* and other epic poetry, not to the source of the contents, but to the rhetoric and form of the genre - to poetic exaggeration or licence.<sup>41</sup> To his mind, poetic licence - taking liberties with atomic facts for aesthetic reasons - though an integral and necessary element of epic poetry, was not a desirable quality in the kind of representation he wished to produce. This judgement clearly indicates Herodotus' commitment to accuracy, his reliance on

<sup>38</sup> Hunter, *Herodotus and Thucydides*, pp. 56 - 57, 71.

<sup>39</sup> Herodotus, *The History*, 2 (5 - 105).

<sup>40</sup> For example, see *Ibid.*, 2 (5); 2 (10 - 13); 2 (18 - 23); 2 (43 - 45); 2 (106) etc.

<sup>41</sup> Hunter, *Herodotus and Thucydides*, pp. 55 - 56.

research as a methodology for ascertaining atomic facts, and his faithfulness in representing research results, as he interpreted them.

All this suggests two fundamental differences between the epic poets and Herodotus. Firstly, the poets aimed primarily to represent the Past in ways that would entertain, please and perhaps edify their audience, and geared their methodology accordingly. In contrast, Herodotus was primarily committed to attempting an edifying and acceptable, but also an accurate and careful representation of what his research (*historia*) indicated that people of his time believed, *or ought to believe*, about the past as he - Herodotus - had come to understand these beliefs. This aim, too, requires a methodology particularly suited to its needs. Faithful representation and personal understanding (as opposed to an impersonal "grasp" or emotional empathy) can only be the products of immersion in the most scrupulous investigation possible - a practice that, today, we call "research". Consequently, the second fundamental difference is the emphasis Herodotus laid on research as the route to accurate representation of the Past, a methodology not necessarily favoured by the epic poets.

### **Herodotus' representation of reality**

Herodotus' methodology and use of the word "*historia*" to describe its outcome, together with his claim to be recording deeds that were (actually) manifested, makes it clear that he saw his own craft as different from that of the epic poets: His intention was not to be a fiction (or "faction") writer. Instead, he aimed to gain acceptance of his work on methodological grounds - through accurate synthesis and reporting of the oral traditions of his time, combined with those of his own personal observations and experiences that cast light on those past places and events he judged to be relevant to his overarching aim. All this was interwoven with a poetics of history designed to produce an aestheticization of the past that would be both comprehensible and credible to his audience.

As we noted, Herodotus' ultimate aim was not simply to produce a factual account of the Past. Indeed, given the mythic orientation of Greek culture at that time, it is unlikely that he was concerned to distinguish between myth and fact, as each contributed in its own way to the Greeks' understanding of their world - to the "truth" of that time. What would have been far more important to Herodotus, was to distinguish between what was valid - acceptable as opposed to implausible or unacceptable - in the intellectual context of his time. In contemporary terms, Herodotus was concerned to provide an accurate, credible, coherent and acceptable representation of his and his time's Past consciousness, to expand and refine this consciousness and to preserve it in the most powerful form he could. In this sense, Herodotus certainly strove for accuracy, validity and coherence with "known" atomic facts, presented in narrative form, rather than for mere factuality. Nor was he willing to accept a representation of the Past based on unbridled imagination.<sup>42</sup> To achieve his goal, he undertook genuine research in order to ascertain verifiable atomic facts and incorporate them into valid, coherent narratives, using the rudimentary methodology then at his disposal in conjunction with historical poetics in the form of choice of topics, interpretation and selection. In terms of the intellectual context of Herodotus' time and culture, this may reasonably be considered

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<sup>42</sup> Fomara. *Nature of History*, p. 47.

what we would call a sophisticated and fairly successful attempt to achieve truth (in the coherence theory sense of the word) about selected aspects of past reality.

This prompts the question of<sup>2</sup> what has happened to Herodotus' representation over the past two-and-a-half thousand years. Today, a great deal of Herodotus' narrative has fallen into as much historical disrepute as has Homer's. For example, both the existence of the Greek gods and Herodotus' account of their origins are universally dismissed, as is much of the detail he provides in his accounts of the Human Age, especially the anecdotes surrounding the origin of the Persian War. It is also accepted that Herodotus' representation is highly selective and incomplete. On the other hand, judging by the contents of contemporary accounts of the rise of Western Culture, it is remarkable how much of the eventual core of Herodotus' narrative has been accepted into the canon of contemporary academic historical knowledge.<sup>43</sup> This constitutes a tribute to the quality of his research and the accuracy, as far as can be ascertained, of his atomic facts, combined with a rejection of the temporally situated mindset that produced them. This ambivalent attitude towards Herodotus poses a dilemma: how can a narrative that once fulfilled criteria for truth, now be judged at least partially untrue and not valid as a representation of the Past? An answer to this question, would undoubtedly enlighten the problem of historical truth claims.

## Conclusion

Breisach claims that Herodotus and Thucydides shared a common central principle which unites their work and separates it from epic literature: a concern for the truth.<sup>44</sup> In Herodotus' case, this took the form of a desire to produce reliable and valid representations of aspects of the Past, for which he made at least implicit truth claims. More significantly, he pursued this aim by undertaking rigorous research, for which he began developing an innovative methodology. Even so, Breisach's claim can only be sustained with respect to Herodotus in terms of a coherence theory of truth. This complicates the issue, as both the body of historical knowledge and historical concerns are historic phenomena themselves, and consequently subject to change through time. The writing of History, as a human action, is also temporally situated. This means that it is necessary to accept the historicity of historical truth and to appreciate that historical truth is not simply the sum total of atomic facts about the Past, but something both less and more.

The establishment of atomic historical facts, which can only be reached through thorough and critical research is merely the first (though inescapable) step in representing historical truth. The "something less and more" is the historian's *interpretation* of atomic facts - her/his own historical consciousness - combined with the use of a methodology for successfully communicating the cognitive and affective significance of research findings. This consciousness, together with the aim of the project itself, permeates and directs each and every step of historical production. For

<sup>43</sup> See, for example: M. Chambers, R. Grew, D. Herlihy, T. K. Rabb and I. Woloch, *The Western experience* (1995); M. Kishlansky, P. Geary, P. O'Brien and R. Bin Wong, *Societies and cultures in World History* (1995); A. Esler, *The human venture a world history from prehistory to the present* (1996).

<sup>44</sup> Breisach, *Historiography*, p. 21.

Herodotus, historical truth would seem not to have been absolute or immutable, but a personal human construct that is embedded in a particular historical context - what we might, today, refer to as "critical historical consciousness". As the attribution of meaning is a human action, it follows that knowledge is mediated reality - a human construct - and thus that the pursuit of knowledge, whether in the form of scientific investigation or not, must necessarily involve mediatory aestheticization throughout the investigation and dissemination processes. Clearly then, the attribute of truth and the activity of *poesis* cannot be diametrically opposed, but are rather inevitably intertwined. The distinction between History and Fiction can only be maintained on methodological grounds, not content or even intention.

Stated more simply, the inescapable disciplinary requirement for a representation to qualify as "History" is not that it must be absolutely "true", but that rigorous and academically acceptable research and the accurate reporting of research results must play a central role in its composition.

To anyone who has failed to appreciate the permeating irony of "postmodern" historical theory and the rhetorical nature of its radicalism, these conclusions must be a severe disappointment. Provided one excludes their metaphysical and existential implications, confining them strictly within the boundaries of academic theory and practice, "postmodern" conceptions of truth have the appearance of historical old hat - a restatement of the practical knowledge of the earliest historian. This is why Jenkins' "postmodern" manifesto<sup>45</sup> begins with a theoretical "Big Bang" and ends with a practical whimper in which he admits the limited nature of the changes he would like to see in historical practice.<sup>46</sup>

Claiming that "postmodernism" has nothing new to say on the issue of historical truth is very different from suggesting that it amounts to little more than **The Historical Method** dressed up in stone-washed Levis. It would be hard to dispute the positive contributions "postmodernism" has made to historical practice in such areas as Gender History or the functioning of power in past human affairs. On a wider front, the "postmodern" antimetaphysics of uncertainty constitute a powerful, compelling, disturbing and challenging existential development. But, even though we may find assertions of the problematic nature of truth and truth claims completely justifiable on the existential level, this has little impact on the nature of the historical project as a process of identifying, interpreting and, especially, organizing traces left by the Past in such a way as to represent past reality as intelligible, significant, relevant and useful to a particular era and culture.

In terms of Herodotus' historical theory and practice, as we have seen, historical truth is not, and should not be presented as, absolute, but rather as the product of a broad but rigorous methodology. Contrary to general belief, truth claims are not a distinguishing characteristic of History. However, thorough empirical research is. In this respect, it is illuminating to note that the majority of the criticisms of "postmodernism" we noted at the beginning of the paper revolved around the issue of research, rather

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<sup>45</sup> Jenkins, *Rethinking history*.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68 - 70.

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than truth. If South African "postmodernist" historical practitioners wish to be taken seriously by the professional historical establishment, they need to pay more attention to the convention of thorough empirical research and the rhetoric of giving thorough account of that research. Novick sums up this necessity admirably in defending his own extraordinarily thorough research and reference technique:

I do indeed believe that an argument can possess 'relative autonomy... from details of the evidence.' ...Addressing the existing historical profession, which has its privileged idiom, its rules about what makes you gain credibility and what makes you lose it, its fetishized procedures and modes of discourse, I do those things that gain me credibility and avoid those things that would make me less believable and more vulnerable - that would embarrass and tend to discredit me. Those whose views are safely middle-of-the-road can risk carelessness: those of us whose work in one way or another challenges conventional wisdom can't afford to...<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Peter Novick, "AHR Forum My Correct Views on Everything" in *American Historical Review*, 96, 3 (June 1991), pp. 701 - 702.