

WRITING BEYOND TIME: THE DURABILITY OF HISTORICAL TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

When we think in terms of the durability of historical texts, some works instantly come to mind: Herodotus's, Thucydides's, and Polybius's war narratives, Plutarch's comparative biographies, Eusebius's ecclesiastical history, Augustine's *City of God*, Jean Froissart's chronicles, Francesco Guicciardini's history of Florence, Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Jules Michelet's *History of France*, Leopold von Ranke's *History of the Reformation*, Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, Fernand Braudel's *Mediterranean*, and Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, among others. Historians instantly perceive them as durable texts, part of a canon of history and historiography. Surrounded as we are by the exaltation of innovation over tradition, and assuming the challenging concept of "writing as historical practice" proposed by the editor of this issue, In this article I examine the conditions that might be considered necessary for historical writing to achieve durability, propose what conditions of creation and reception enabled this longevity, justify *why* these and other historical texts have the potential for durability, and discuss what practical lessons we might obtain from this inquiry. I begin by making some distinctions among the three related concepts of durability, the classic, and the canon, and try to establish the specific conditions of the durability of historical texts, focusing on the *effect of contemporaneity* and the connections between the concepts of durability and the practical past.

Keywords: historical texts, durability, effect of contemporaneity, practical past, classic, canon

*My work has been composed,
not for the applause of today's hearing,
but as a possession for all time.*

—Thucydides²

1. I appreciate the comments and suggestions on early drafts of this article by Rocío G. Davis, Gary Shaw, Hans Kellner, Miri Rubin, Laura Stark, Gabrielle M. Spiegel, Montserrat Herrero, Robert A. Rosenstone, and Kalle Pihlainen.

2. Thucydides, *Histories*, 1: 22, 4, quoted in Lowell Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence in Thucydides* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 150.

*Only strong personalities can endure history;
the weak are extinguished by it.*
—Friedrich Nietzsche³

Though Nietzsche might be considered one of the foundational figures of post-modernism, he would probably not be happy today with the ephemeral character of current historiographical trends. In the last fifty years, historians have been shaken by a good number of *turns*, witnessed the succession of many *new* histories, and been convulsed by the emergence of many *de-* and *post-* tendencies. In the context of rapidly developing theories and the apparent instability of the epistemic panorama, historians are compelled to seek labels that might define these new movements, which even include reiterative formulas such as “new-new” histories or “post-post” structuralisms and modernisms.⁴ As a consequence, they appear to be experiencing difficulties in locating or identifying “enduring” history, within a shifting theoretical context and rapid generational transitions.

In this historiographical age of the “ever-changing,” to acknowledge that certain historical texts might be said to have achieved endurance might appear, at first, a subversive move. We have to overcome our natural overemphasis on the importance of our own time, in the manner in which T. S. Eliot, in 1944, made his century key to his discussion of the classic in literature, in which the last reverberations of the British Empire conditioned his perspective.⁵ We also have to establish a firm balance between the past and the present, the enduring and the transient, the essence of the texts created in the past and the disposition of today’s readers, since durable texts “possess intrinsic qualities that endure, but possess also an openness to accommodation which keeps them alive under endlessly varying dispositions,” as Frank Kermode suggests.⁶ Nevertheless, we should also reflect on what is permanent in history, since we would otherwise be in danger of falling into the trap of devaluating what is really *new* in history as opposed to an adjustment or a result of the evolution of a paradigm, to borrow Thomas Kuhn’s concept. As Peter Burke explains, “like scientific revolutions, historical revolutions are constantly being discovered these days, and our conceptual currency is in serious danger of debasement.”⁷ Inflation may function as a temporary therapy, but it does not provide stability and permanence. Thus, surrounded as we are by the exaltation of innovation over tradition, and assuming the challenging concept of “writing as historical practice” proposed by the editor of this issue, I will examine the conditions that might be considered necessary for historical

3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History* (New York: Liberal Arts, 1957), 32.

4. Ignacio Olábarri, “New New History: A Longue Durée Structure,” *History and Theory*, 34, no. 1 (1995), 1-29; See the chapter “Postmodernity as the Age of Dominant Change: Poststructuralist Postmodernist,” in Ernst Breisach, *On the Future of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 57-166.

5. See T. S. Eliot, “What is a Classic?,” in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 53-71.

6. Frank Kermode, *The Classic: Literary Images of Permanence and Change* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1983), 43-44. See also Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).

7. Peter Burke, “Ranke the Revolutionary,” in *Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline*, ed. Georg G. Iggers and James M. Powell (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 37.

writing to achieve durability and discuss what practical lessons we might obtain from this inquiry.

When I think in terms of the durability of historical texts, some works instantly come to mind: Herodotus's narratives on Persian wars, Thucydides's stories of Peloponnesian conflicts, Polybius's story of Roman domination in the Mediterranean, Plutarch's comparative biographies, Eusebius's ecclesiastical history, Augustine's *City of God*, Jean Froissart's chronicles of the Anglo-French Hundred Years' War, Francesco Guicciardini's urban history of Florence, Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Jules Michelet's *History of France*, Leopold von Ranke's *History of the Reformation*, Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, Fernand Braudel's *Mediterranean*, and Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, among others. These works developed from the genesis of that complex operation that we call history and still play a part, in one way or another, in our cultural and historiographical landscape. They are not—and probably never will be—bestsellers as their counterparts in literature such as Homer's *Iliad*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, and Shakespeare's dramas continue to be. Yet historians instantly perceive them as durable texts, part of a canon of history and historiography. We could disagree about the details of the specific list of works that deserve to be called "durable" (this would otherwise be the task of making a canon according to the related concept of "canon," which I do not aim to do here), but in any case the fact of its duration is too evident to require a theoretical justification. Yet what it does require is a justification for *why* these and other historical texts have the potential for durability, what conditions of creation and reception enabled this longevity, and what practical lessons we could learn from this rhetorical fact.

THE CONCEPTS OF DURABILITY, THE CLASSIC, AND THE CANON

I should begin by making some distinctions among the three related concepts of durability, the classic, and the canon. They may appear to be synonymous, or at least analogous, since one given historical text may certainly fall under all three categories. Yet important distinctions should be made among them; they should not be considered synonyms.

The classic is the most comprehensive of the three. A classic in history is a model text that embodies both permanence and change, being historical and durable at the same time, conveying convention and novelty, becoming a source of permanent inspiration, functioning as a paradigmatic model for future writing of history, and able to create multiple and diverse interpretations without losing its original integrity. Herodotus's *Persian Wars*' ethnological approach, Augustine's *City of God*'s historical-theological perspective, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*'s reflection on rising and decadence, Michelet's *History of France*'s praise of the people as historical actors, Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance*'s privileging of culture rather than politics or economics, Braudel's *Mediterranean*'s structural synchronization of the three durations, and Hayden White's *Metahistory*'s interpretive keys for historical texts, among others, provide

glimpses of the deep structure of historical consciousness, models of historical writing and, by implication, “[make] them worthy of study and reflection long after their scholarship has become outmoded and their arguments have been consigned to the status of commonplaces of the culture moments of composition.”⁸

The canon is the consensual enshrinement of particular texts in a given discipline, meant to present the essential texts of this particular field. As Ankhi Mukherjee has argued, “canonicity implies a formation of a corpus, the congealing of the ‘literary art of Memory,’ . . . the making up of a list of books requisite for a literary education, and the formation of an exclusive club, however painstakingly contested the rules of inclusion (and exclusion) may be.”⁹ Thus, even if the notion of canon and the classic are closely related, the latter may not be reduced to the former because “the classic is primarily a singular act of literature, while the canon is ‘an aristocracy of texts.’”¹⁰ The task of constructing a canon has already been done for Western literature by Harold Bloom, a task whose results have been approved by many but, arguably, rejected by many others.¹¹ Yet it has not been done for history—and even discussion about its eventual appropriateness is still missing.

Finally, durability, the concept at the center of this essay, is the most inductively perceptible of the three, and its experience does not depend on critics’ consensus or readers’ agreement. Rather, the notion of durability conveys just the empirical fact that the memory of these texts is still present, not only in our readings but also in historians’ imagination, teachings, examples, and quotations. Durability is the empirical quality of preservation, longevity, and perpetuation of certain historical texts that have overcome the passage of time. Its factual quality enables historical-empirical observation, as its intrinsic relation with time itself encourages historiographical-theoretical speculation. That a historical text is durable does not mean that its meaning and interpretations are closed and univocal. On the contrary, durable historical writings are usually susceptible—and this lies at the heart of their lasting character—to multiple reading, criticism, and interpretation.

Among these three related concepts, I argue that we should engage durability first to gain understanding of what a classic in history is and how a canon should be constructed (or not). Durability does not require critical consensus: “The classic and the canonical work usher [in] a polymorphous textuality that literary cultures value, and both involve the dimension of criticism, or interpretive traditions that contest the definition of literary value.”¹² Some historical works might certainly fall under these three categories at the same time—everybody

8. Hayden V. White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 180.

9. Ankhi Mukherjee, *What Is a Classic?: Postcolonial Rewriting and Invention of the Canon* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2014), 31. The phrase “the literary art of Memory” is from Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 17.

10. Mukherjee, *What Is a Classic?*, 31. The phrase “an aristocracy of texts,” is from John Gillory, “The Ideology of Canon-Formation: T. S. Eliot and Cleanth Brooks,” *Critical Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (1983), 175.

11. Bloom, *The Western Canon*.

12. Mukherjee, *What is a Classic?*, 31.

would include Herodotus's *Histories* in a list of perdurable, classic, and canonical works—but this is compatible with the fact they deserve diverse approaches, examinations, definitions, and analyses of internal rules, because they respond to very different epistemic and rhetorical realities. Durability is related primarily to temporal validation, whereas classic is about what is new and old in history, and the canon requires external verification by critical observation and consensual agreement.

According to these differences in content and form, the concept of a classic, and the correlative discussion of canon and genre, has been theorized by literary critics, whereas the concept of durability seems more fitting for historical theory and criticism. In addition, the concept of durability entails historical implications in itself, since it directly refers to categories of temporality, change, and permanence. Consequently, it encapsulates everything required for its constitution as an event in itself, since, as Paul Ricoeur explains, “all change enters the field of history as a quasi-event.”¹³ Importantly, my theoretical sources shift here from literary critics such as T. S. Eliot, Frank Kermode, and Mikhail Bakhtin to philosophers such as Reinhart Koselleck, Paul Ricoeur, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Since historians deal with a real—not imagined—past, they need to address the categories of philosophers at some point. This epistemic move is particularly imperative in the approach to the concept of durability, whose interest is not only historiographical but also properly historical.

This dual historical-historiographical dimension reflects my double interest in the concept of duration as materialized in the two main questions that I will try to answer in this article. First, we perceive the fact that there are some historical texts that are, quite simply, durable, so that we may also inductively analyze how they function and what qualities might be considered to have contributed to making them that way. Second, since the very concept of durability has historical connotations, we can wonder whether there *should* be works that have such power. This second question has evident normative implications, which I will try to approach at the end of the essay, justifying why I argue that the reading and examination of these durable texts should be promoted among historians and that the texts may serve as landmarks of historical training.

CONDITIONS OF DURABILITY

Literary critics who have dealt with the concept of the classic, T. S. Eliot, J. M. Coetzee, and Frank Kermode among them, agree on the ability of certain authors to create lasting works, privileging Virgil as the model of durability and classicism. To be sure, transpositions between literary criticism and historical criticism require caveats, since the experience of the durability of literary texts differs from that of historical texts. Leopold von Ranke spoke directly to this point when he stated that “while accomplished poetical creations are immortal, even outstanding historical works become outdated.”¹⁴ In addition, Aristotle's conviction of

13. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), II, 224.

14. Leopold von Ranke, in a review of Enrico Caterino Davila's *History of the French Civil Wars*, quoted in Rudolf Vierhaus, “Historiography between Science and Art,” in Iggers and Powell, eds., *Leopold von Ranke*, 62.

the prominence of the universalism of literature over the particularism of history is based on the fact that creative writing is not restricted by the requirement of referentiality as historians' writing is. James Joyce once said of his *Ulysses* that "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries over what I meant, and that's the only way of ensuring one's immortality."¹⁵ His strategy may function for a literary text, but would be untenable in a historical narrative. Historical writings might be challenging for readers but, fortunately for the aims of this article, historians do not deliberately place enigmas and puzzles in them.

Based on this distinction between the durability of historical and literary writing, some concepts created by critics may help in understanding the problem. Durability directly leads to the notion of coordination of space/time, embodied in Bakhtin's concept of *chronotope*, "the intrinsic connections of temporal and spatial relationship that are artistically expressed in literature."¹⁶ Bakhtin refers here to the ability of literature to create a coherent sense of coordination between space and time, and narrate in accordance with it. He offers in his analysis some characteristic developments of narrative chronotopes, such as the genres of biography and autobiography, the medieval chivalric romance, and other examples of global novels such as those by Cervantes or Rabelais.¹⁷ All these genres have evident parallelisms with history and, accordingly, Bakhtin explains, "some general characteristics of the methods used to express time in these works."¹⁸ For instance, *Don Quixote* reveals the parodied hybridization of the "alien, miraculous world"—chronotope of medieval chivalric romances—with the "high road winding though one's native land"—chronotope of the picaresque novel contemporary to Cervantes. Bakhtin shows that chronotopes are organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of a novel and, analogically, of history.

When one considers Bakhtin's chronotope as a condition of durability, some historical texts come to mind, ones that have opted for long duration and synchronization between the past they are narrating and the present they are living. This way, they can create that particular sense of coordination between space and time, and between the remote past and the present. In his ambitious, long-term analysis of the feudal society of eleventh- to fourteenth-century Europe, published in 1938, Marc Bloch connected the specific problems of medieval society with modern and contemporary social challenges. After hundreds of pages of detailed examination of how feudal societies functioned, he described feudalism as a "type of society" with an "essential element"—that is, a concept that goes beyond time itself; it is also applied to a modern societies.¹⁹ His short chapter "The Persistence of European Feudalism" at the end of his book illustrates how detailed research

15. Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 535.

16. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics," in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.

17. *Ibid.*, 111. For the application to this concept to historiography, see Hayden White, "The Nineteenth-Century as Chronotope," in Hayden White, *The Fiction of Narrative* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 237-246, and Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 210-213.

18. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time," 146.

19. Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society. 2. Social Classes and Political Organization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 442.

into a particular topic may open broad perspectives that contemporary readers may apply to their particular political and social experiences.²⁰ At first, one might think that this chronological jump could damage Bloch's reputation as a trustworthy historian. Yet anyone could distrust today the reliability of a historian who stated that "anachronism" is the mortal sin of the historian and who left many works with great erudite consistency. Indeed, I argue that Bloch's control of the chronotope ("the intrinsic connections of temporal and spatial relationship") and his synchrony (his ability to make the past and the present harmonious) made his *Feudal Society* durable and of historical and sociological interest today.

Braudel's *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* is another key example of how the effective deployment of chronotope supports the durability of historical texts. At first, Braudel aimed to analyze a relatively short time period, from 1550 to 1660, of the evolution of the Mediterranean. Yet in order to understand the whole picture, he based his work on a choral symphony harmonized by the analysis of three big spatial structures—geological formations, physical geography, and human landscapes—and three great temporal synchronic rhythms—short, middle, and long duration.²¹ Braudel's historical analysis is a convincing historical picture that has inspired the work of historians for decades, as well as other professionals of other social sciences such as geography and sociology. The astonishing amount of scholarly work currently being done on the Mediterranean as a whole might stem from the broad perspective that Braudel proposed. Clearly, this could be explained for the research of pan-ethnic and pan-religious perspectives that the current society urgently needs to find—that is, the desire to include Muslims and Jews as well as Christians in the same historical narratives—but also in the context of the interest in coordinating time with geography and environment, which one might track to Braudel.

Another interesting example is Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), whose durability has already been highlighted: "rarely has an historical work had so persistent an influence."²² This book, however well written, is full of generalizations, and most of its content has been critically surpassed by the work of later Renaissance scholars. Nevertheless, as Burckhardt synchronizes several spaces and periods such as classical antiquity, Carolingian Renaissance, twelfth-century Renaissance, and Italian early modern Renaissance, he projects them to the present of readers who may apply the discussion to their own culture. Burckhardt achieves in his text what Bakhtin described as the ability of "literary artistic chronotope," of fusing "spatial and temporal indicators . . . into one carefully thought-out concrete whole. Time, as it were, *thickens*, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope."²³

20. *Ibid.*, 448-452.

21. Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* [1949] (Paris: Colin, 1966).

22. Benjamin Nelson, "Introduction," in Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (New York: Harper, 1958), 4.

23. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time," 84.

In Bloch's, Braudel's, Burckhardt's, and other durable historical texts, *chronotope* thus functions as a combination of temporal, spatial, and sociocultural categories that replace one-dimensional concepts of periods. This explains why Hayden White argues that "for historical studies, the idea of the chronotope has advantages over the notion of the period in a number of ways [since it] demands a greater degree of specificity and of referential concreteness than does the notion of the 'period.'"²⁴ Chronotopes enable these historians to construct "strategies of containment" and "modes of exclusion," to borrow Jameson's phrases, which enables them to create generalizations and conceptualizations such as "the spirit of the age" (Burckhardt), "the dominant structures of hegemony" (Braudel), and "modes of production" (Bloch).²⁵ These conceptualizations permit readers to make deductions, establish interrelations and inferences, and mark continuities and discontinuities to create a general picture of a culture and imagine analogies and parallelism with their own cultures.

Yet at this point the difference between historical and literary accounts re-emerges, and helps us understand Ranke's claim—or, better, Ranke's complaint—about the contrast between the immortality of certain literary narratives and the ephemeral existence of even the most outstanding historical texts ("while accomplished poetical creations are immortal, even outstanding historical works become outdated"²⁶): literature generally contains semantic and rhetorical elements that transcend temporal and spatial structures *external* to the text, whereas historical accounts are inevitably subject to them. As Koselleck puts it, "that a 'history' pre-exists extra-linguistically . . . sets limits to [its] representational potential," so that "only temporal structures, that is, those internal to and demonstrable in related events, can articulate the material factors proper to this [historical] domain of inquiry."²⁷ The constrained epistemic nature of history may explain why durability is more difficult to achieve in historical rather than in literary texts, but does not entirely invalidate it.

THE EFFECT OF CONTEMPORANEITY

Koselleck adds one crucial condition to those of space/time and past/present coordination for the achievement of durability. He distinguishes between chronological and historical time, reflecting the natural and the human dimensions of time.²⁸ Chronological time follows the rhythm of nature. It is based on the fixed and predictable cadence of external coordinates. Historical time, however, is produced by human actions, has human and cultural implications, and is therefore unpredictable. This dualism enables the contemporaneity of two events even if they belong to different chronological moments: as anthropologists have demonstrated, we can

24. White, "The Nineteenth-Century," 242.

25. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 213.

26. Ranke, quoted in Rudolf Vierhaus, "Historiography between Science and Art," in Iggers and Powell, eds., *Leopold von Ranke*, 62.

27. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past* (New York: Columbia University Press), 105 and 94.

28. See especially his epigraph "Development of and Understanding of Specifically Historical Time," in Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 118-123.

find synchronies between the cultures of two groups located in very different spaces or times.²⁹ Koselleck concludes that both natural and historical times belong to the conditions of historical temporalities, but the former never subsumes the latter: “historical temporalities follow a sequence different from the temporal rhythms given in nature.”³⁰

This disruptive and asynchronous relationship between natural and historical time helps us understand the connection between synchronicity and diachronicity that some historical texts achieve. Since some historians are able to combine both levels of time (diachronicity and synchronicity) through narrative and emplotment, their readers perceive the contemporary relevance of their writings. Writing within this diachronic-synchronic frame, even if the historian deals with the remote past, readers may find analogies with their present because of the effect of the historical time deployed in the texts. Thus, historians who are able to create durable works establish their writings on the solid foundations of that “supportive ground of the process in which the present is rooted,” which is, in turn, based on the equidistance and dialectic between remoteness and distancing, as Gadamer and Ricoeur have posited.³¹

Gabrielle M. Spiegel’s thoughts in *The Past as Text* convey this ability of some historical texts to make us reflect on the present as we learn about the past:

It is only by appreciating how deeply this attitude of piety towards the past ran in medieval society that we can begin to understand the use made of history. It is a question not of the mindless repetition of tradition, nor of an inability to innovate or create, but of a compelling necessity to find in the past the means to explain and legitimize every deviation from tradition. In such a society, as Joseph Reese Strayer remarked, “every deliberate modification of an existing type of activity must be based on a study of individual precedents. Every plan for the future is dependent on a pattern which has been found in the past.” The eternal relevance of the past for the present made it a mode of experiencing the reality of contemporary political life, and the examples the past offered had explanatory force in articulating the true and correct nature of present forms of political action. The overall tendency of the chronicles of Saint-Denis was to assimilate past and present into a continuous stream of tradition and to see in this very continuity a form of legitimation.³²

Interestingly, Spiegel is dealing with the burden of tradition in medieval societies, but we keep revising the burden of innovation in our time, and wonder if we could learn something from the difference. She also describes the aspiration of medieval historiography—more specifically, of the thirteenth-century French historical text, *Grandes Chroniques de France*—to “assimilate past and present,” which is precisely the quality I am arguing for as a prerequisite for durability in historical texts.

Another example of this assimilation of past/present or *effect of contemporaneity*—I use this phrase to distinguish this peculiar quality from presentism,

29. Two fascinating examples of this reality developed by anthropologists are: Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940) (on the contemporaneity of different space coordinates) and Clifford Geertz, “Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example,” *American Anthropologist* 59 (1957), 32-54 (on the contemporaneity of different temporal coordinates).

30. Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 96.

31. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989), 297; Ricoeur, *Time*, III, 220.

32. Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *The Past as Text* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 85.

that is, the reduction of the past to the present—comes from Natalie Z. Davis's masterpiece of narrative history, *The Return of Martin Guerre*. At some point in her narration, she *imagines* Bertrande's feelings when facing the first difficulties of her marriage to the peasant Martin Guerre in a small village in sixteenth-century France:

When urged by her relatives to separate from Martin, she firmly refused. Here we come to certain character traits of Bertrande de Rols, which she was already displaying in her sixteenth year: a concern for her reputation as a woman, a stubborn independence, and a shrewd realism about how she could maneuver within the constraints placed upon one of her sex. Her refusal to have her marriage dissolved, which might well have been followed by another marriage at her parents' behest, freed her temporarily from certain wifely duties. It gave her a chance to have a girlhood with Martin's younger sisters, with whom she got on well. And she could get credit for her virtue.³³

We see nothing of the supposed submission of women in medieval and early modern societies depicted by most historians who analyzed these societies before the convincing portrait of Bertrande that Davis constructs in her book. We certainly perceive the hypothetical language, as the historian uses the conditional form when inferring feelings or thoughts. But we are also compelled by the logical conjectures of an impeccable historical methodology and coherent narrative. Yet what most struck me the first time I read the book—apart from Davis's digressions on Bertrande's psychology—is that I found myself thinking at two chronological levels simultaneously. The first, and the most obvious, involved trying to imagine the life of a peasant woman in a traditional society in sixteenth-century France. The second, though implicit, was the projection of Bertrande's thoughts into twentieth-century feminism. Davis established key connections between Bertrande's thoughts with the concerns of twentieth-century women—forging a key *chronotopic* connection.³⁴

Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies* (1957) achieves the effect of contemporaneity by signaling the congruency of medieval Europe with contemporary political and juridical issues. Robert E. Lerner signals this connection between the text's historical content and its readers' current context as the key to its durability:

Without treating the longer-term reception at any length, it may yet be noted that the book became much more popular twenty years after its appearance than it was when it first appeared and then kept up the new pace. . . . Kantorowicz's work has been associated with many catch phrases: "post-modernist," "new historicism," "text archaeology," "history of the body," "Foucauldian interest in power and the body." A different essay would be needed to judge the aptness of such categories. But not only "theorists" take up the book. The shift to cultural history in the later twentieth century made it clear that Kantorowicz's work had much of importance to say about the rites and representations of power.³⁵

Current intellectual, social, and political debates on topics such as power, body, rites, and representation emerge from the book's reading. Learning about the transformations of the doctrine of the king's two bodies and the arcane mysteries of

33. Natalie Z. Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 28.

34. Natalie Z. Davis, "On the Lame," *American Historical Review* 93, no. 3 (1988), 572-603.

35. Robert E. Lerner, *Ernst Kantorowicz: A Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 356-357.

medieval political theology sets us thinking about our own problems, and makes William Chester Jordan conclude that this “remains a wonderfully exciting and constantly rewarding book.”³⁶

These books’ enduring significance arguably arises from the insights they provide to the present, rather than merely to the past. This justifies Max Weber’s claim that the “authority of the eternal yesterday” structures the permanent present. The present conveyed by certain durable historical works may become “the inaugural force of a history that is yet to be made.”³⁷ Here, we arrive at Nietzsche’s idea of the “strength of the present,” which provides us with the “inspiring consolation of hope,” and turns “disadvantages” into the “advantages” of history.³⁸ Koselleck defines this process as “the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous.”³⁹ Martin Heidegger, in turn, moved from the notion of *temporality* to that of *temporalization* to facilitate that *making-present* that some durable historical works attain.⁴⁰ Ricoeur locates this level of making-present “on the side of historical consciousness,” and argues that it constitutes “the force of the present.”⁴¹

Heidegger’s process of *temporalization* is historiographically verified, for instance, in the moral teachings that we obtain from historical narrations, irrespective of the period or the events they describe. Durable historical works convey the fact that, although historical circumstances change, passions are timeless. The ways in which Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, and Plutarch formulate the effects of their characters’ motives and conduct continue to compel readers. From a political point of view, the interrelation between natural and historical time invites a comparison of revolutions, wars, and different legal constitutions at a certain level of abstraction or typology: “besides such diachronic structures for events, there are also longer-term structures that are more familiar today.”⁴² Braudel also managed to synchronize very diverse geographical, social, economic, and political temporal structures. His structural approach to history is based both on the natural-chronological diachronicity of events and on the human-historical synchronicity of structures, beyond the different strata of time in which they may be located. He uses the synchronic and the diachronic procedures simultaneously, “favoring synchrony when he describes, and diachrony when he narrates,” as historians generally do.⁴³ He created a new type of plot, which “unite[s] structures, cycles, and events by joining together heterogeneous temporalities and contradictory chronicles.”⁴⁴

36. William Chester Jordan, “Preface,” in Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), xv.

37. Ricoeur, *Time*, III, 240.

38. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), 63.

39. Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 95.

40. Ricoeur, *Time*, III, 255. Koselleck’s use of the term *temporalization* is analogous, but he uses it specifically to strength his theories on the distinction between chronological and historical time (Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, 121).

41. Ricoeur, *Time*, III, 256.

42. Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 106-107.

43. *Ibid.*, 217.

44. Ricoeur, *Time*, I, 216.

As cultural agents, historians establish a written tradition, which involves a peculiar but unique coexistence of past and present, “insofar as present consciousness has the possibility of free access to everything handed down in writing.”⁴⁵ Thus, historical texts facilitate the coexistence of the past and the present, as the classic images of the contemporaneity of historical texts (Benedetto Croce), the history as exile (Siegfried Kracauer), or history as re-enactment (R. G. Collingwood) remind us. As Gadamer posits, “a written tradition is not a fragment of a past world, but has already raised itself beyond this into the sphere of the meaning that it expresses.”⁴⁶ Or, as he explains in hermeneutical terms, “only the part of the past that is not past offers the possibility of historical knowledge.”⁴⁷

Yet my point is that not all historical texts can bring the past into the present through the different forms of contemporaneity, re-enactment, or classicism. Indeed, most historical texts are authored, experienced by readers, and acknowledged by critics as “archaeological” artifacts rather than lived contemporary creations. So, the process of temporalization suggested by Heidegger is attained only by certain privileged historical texts that have achieved durability. They function as dynamic and living documents rather than inert primary sources.

Establishing these rhetorical connections between the past and the present is not an easy task. The assumption of the “effect of contemporaneity” implies the creation of a new kind of literary authority, universality, and originality. Historians authoring durable works manage to develop a set of techniques and assumptions that make possible the emergence of a new approach to a given subject, a new genre, a new methodology, new theoretical assumptions. As Polybius acknowledges, “for as I am not, like former historians, dealing with the history of one nation, such as Greece or Persia, but have undertaken to describe the events occurring in all known parts of the world.”⁴⁸ Eusebius’s task of writing about a Christian emperor presented new problems in the past and called for new solutions in the present, and kept intact its original charm as political biography.⁴⁹ Even if the historical data and most of his interpretations are currently outdated, Gibbon is still considered “the first of the historians of the Roman Empire,” and a continued source of inspiration for anyone trying to understand not only Roman political and social structures, but also the rules governing the never-ending dialectic between rising and decadence, permanence and change.⁵⁰ Ranke and Burckhardt viewed history as uniquely important in making readers look beyond the course of events and to see the decisive role that values play in human development. Huizinga’s *The Waning of the Middle Ages* anticipated some of the most relevant twentieth-century historiographical tendencies: the *Annales* school of the 1930s, the post-1945 American school of symbolic anthropology headed by Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz, and the cultural history associated with the

45. Gadamer, *Truth*, 390.

46. *Ibid.*, 391.

47. *Ibid.*, 289.

48. Polybius, *The Histories*, transl. W. R. Paton (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 333 (Book, II, 37).

49. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, “Introduction,” in *Eusebius: Life of Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 27.

50. Roy Porter, *Edward Gibbon: Making History* (London: Weidenfeld, 1988), 164.

Soviet theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and the narrativist Natalie Davis, among many others.⁵¹ These durable books also illustrate Kuhn's idea of the essential tension between tradition and innovation proper of the best scientific and academic creations. They established a tension between convergent and divergent thinking because they were firmly rooted in contemporary scientific tradition and also gave rise a new one.⁵²

Thus historians producing durable works simultaneously represent stability and provoke rupture. They are breakthroughs in historical writing, as they usually lead readers to rethink and remake history.⁵³ Yet they also acquire the obligations of primogeniture in a lineage. They may or may not have followers and disciples—actually, most of them have not really established a “school” *per se*, as shown in the cases of Burckhardt, Huizinga, and Kantorowicz. Yet what remains in collective memory—in this particular case, professional historians' collective memory—are those first works, rather than those of their contemporaries or successors. Nietzsche's and Foucault's concept of genealogy may help us to understand this apparent contradictory ambivalence of historians as agents of rupture with the past, continuity in the present, and durability for the future.⁵⁴ Once pioneer historians establish a new subject or methodological or theoretical paradigm, historians of historiography construct a genealogy that exalts particular links in the chain, constituted basically for those durable historians and historical works I engage in this article. They are able to combine “historical time,” since durable works always live in the present, and we can find synchronies beyond the different periods in which those works have been created, and “chronological time,” when they are objects of the history of historiography, and one can establish a coherent diachronic narrative in their accounts “from Herodotus to the present.”

DEALING WITH THE PAST, LIVING IN THE PRESENT, OPEN TO THE FUTURE

The particular effect of the contemporaneity of durable historical works, and its negotiation with tradition and innovation at the same time, leads us to another marker of durability of historical writings: timelessness. Durable works focus on the past, but they also deal in one way or another with the present, and are open to the future. This is clear from the beginning of historical practice, since Greek historians directed their histories not only to the past and to the present, but also toward future time and future readers. Indeed, Thucydides claimed his work to be composed “not for the applause of today's hearing, but as a possession for all time.”⁵⁵ Herodotus also dealt with the past, but added comments on the present. When he states that his account will cover both small and large cities equally,

51. Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages* (New York: Morrow, 1991), 381.

52. Thomas S. Kuhn, “The Essential Tension: Tradition and Innovation in Scientific Research,” in Kuhn, *The Essential Tension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 226.

53. Averil Cameron, “Eusebius of Cesarea and the Rethinking of History,” in *Tria Corda: Scritti in onore di Arnaldo Momigliano*, ed. E. Gabba (Como: Edizioni New Press, 1983), 71-88.

54. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).

55. Thucydides, *History*, I, 22, 4, quoted in Lowell Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence in Thucydides* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 150.

he mentions the evolution of the measure of these cities “since the majority of cities that in earlier times were important have become small, and those that were important in my time were formerly small.”⁵⁶ His intention to probe the history of small as well as great cities also demonstrates his belief that explanatory significance may be found at the microscopic level as well as in micro- and macro-history. In addition, Herodotus’s open ending invites future interpretations.

This natural transition from the past to the present and the future gives rise to a simultaneously diachronic and synchronous approach. Herodotus considers the result of every action and event, so that

[t]his decision is significant in inviting us to recognize that the meaning of his text is not to be bounded *diachronically* by the limits of his authorial intentions. And the same appears to be true also on a *synchronous* level, for Herodotus foregrounds the fact that history is contested territory: that different interpretations and explanations of historical events and personalities arise from the perspectives of different individuals or groups.⁵⁷

In their polyphonic symphony of temporal perspectives, historians authoring durable works construct texts that open a multiplicity of perspectives for readers. They explain their protagonists’ thoughts and motivations as they initiate a polyphonic dialogue among the author, the characters of the story he or she is telling, and the readers: “history arises from a conversation between the historian and historical agents, other scholars and the consumers of history.”⁵⁸ History becomes intermingled in the actors’ and author’s mind, an idea that Collingwood modeled in his “history as re-enactment.”⁵⁹

Durable historical works arguably link the past with the present encouraging the audience’s imagination, yet—this is crucial for my argument—without falling into a reductive presentism. This complex rhetorical operation, which I call the “effect of contemporaneity” to distinguish it from “presentism,” was first practiced by historians of antiquity. Jonas Grethlein has noted that Thucydides restored “the presentness to the past.”⁶⁰ Historical works are durable when they serve methodological purposes and provide tools for understanding in the present. Indeed, Lours E. Lord notes of Thucydides what might clearly describe this form of durability: “In his conception of what is required of a writer of history he [Thucydides] is nearer to the twentieth century AD than he is to the fifth BC.”⁶¹

Thus, the value of durable historical texts can also be attributed to this contemporaneity rather than the charm of their language or the entertainment value of their narratives. As Darien Shanske argues, Thucydides’s *History* draws readers

56. Herodotus, *Histories*, I, 5, 4, quoted in C. Dewald, “Wanton Kings, Pickled Heroes, and Gnomical Founding Fathers: Strategies of Meaning at the End of Herodotus’ Histories,” in *Classical Closure: Reading the End in Greek and Latin Literature*, ed. D. Roberts, F. Dunn, and D. P. Fowler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 62-82.

57. Emily Baragwanath, *Motivation and Narrative in Herodotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2.

58. Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *Fifty Key Thinkers on History* (London: Routledge, 2000), 55-56.

59. William H. Dray, *History as Re-Enactment: R. G. Collingwood’s Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

60. Jonas Grethlein, “The Presence of the Past in Thucydides,” in *Thucydides between History and Literature*, ed. Antonis Tsakmakis and Melina Tamiolaki (Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), 91-118.

61. Lours E. Lord, *Thucydides and the World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945), 216.

into its distinctive worldview because of its kinship to the contemporary language and structure of classical tragedy rather than the beauty of his prose.⁶² Actually, it has been argued that some durable historical texts have analogies with their counterpart genres in literature: Herodotus's *Histories* with Homer's epics, Thucydides's and Jean Froissart's chronicles with Sophocles's tragedies, and Jules Michelet's, Carlo Ginzburg's and Natalie Z. Davis's works with the modern novel.⁶³ The analogy with literary genres endows some historical texts with that universality that led Aristotle to claim the superiority of literature over history.⁶⁴ To me, it is not by chance that Hayden White's *Metahistory* (an enduring work itself) was based on Frye's categorization of genres that shaped his concept of "modes of emplotment."⁶⁵

Using the effect of contemporaneity, durable historical works raise questions "that can and must be asked over and over again and, in so doing, implicate the one who asks—that is, [they] must perform tragic temporality. Moreover, the seriousness of these questions demands that they not be stilled with facile answers."⁶⁶ Michelet's works, for example, are governed by the universality of principles such as justice, freedom, patriotism, hope in the future, and a cosmopolitical ideal.⁶⁷ Bryan Palmer notes that one of the strengths of Thompson's book was his move beyond the particularities of specific experiences to a full comprehension of the world in motion.⁶⁸ Michelet's and Thompson's references to the present and projection to the future make their work timeless. This frame helps us understand the entry in Ranke's diary, probably from 1816–1817:

One might assume that the difference between poetry and philosophy originates from the fact that poetry strives to represent the infinite by the finite, while the aim of philosophy is to explain the finite by the infinite. The intermediate link would be an ideal historian which depicts the infinite in the finite and traces it as it is manifest as an idea and on the whole, and would bring it before our eyes and mind.⁶⁹

To summarize my arguments to this point in order to move into the practical and propositional part of this article, I posit that the durability of historical texts is thus guaranteed by their ability to connect the past with the present to overcome temporality, to write beyond time, to make available the past that historians are accurately narrating in the present of the audience's imagination. This involves *rhetorically* attaining the presentness of the past without losing the conviction of the inviolable *reality* of the pastness of the past. Up to this point, I have tried to show the ability of certain durable historical texts to pull the past into the present.

62. Darien Shanske, *Thucydides and the Philosophical Origins of History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

63. F. W. Walbank, "History and Tragedy," in *Greek and Roman Historiography*, ed. John Marincola (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 389–412.

64. Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 7–11.

65. *Ibid.*, 7–11.

66. Shanske, *Thucydides*, 152–153.

67. Oscar A. Haac, *Les principes inspireurs de Michelet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951).

68. Bryan D. Palmer, *The Making of E. P. Thompson* (Toronto: New Hogtown, 1981), 73.

69. Quoted in Rudolf Vierhaus, "Historiography between Science and Art," in Iggers and Powell, eds., *Leopold von Ranke*, 67.

But, *how* have they attained this effect of contemporaneity? What can we learn of this process?

DURABILITY AND THE PRACTICAL PAST

The philosopher Michael Oakeshott found different ways to describe the intellectual and rhetorical process of bringing the past into the present: “The past is a consequence of understanding the present world in a particular manner”; “The past, in whatever manner it appears, is a certain sort of reading of the present”; “The activity of the historian is pre-eminently that of understanding present events—the things that are before him—as evidence for past happenings.”⁷⁰ The Spanish novelist Carmen Martín-Gaité wrote in 1979: “The meaning we attribute to things we look at is what covertly prompts memory to pick them out for later.”⁷¹ Though philosophers and poets have conveyed this reality, historians know that the task of gaining contemporaneity in historical writing without falling into presentism or anachronism is not that easy, since this operation involves rhetorically attaining the presentness of the past in order to maintain readerly attention. Historians must respect the pastness of the past while recognizing the inescapability of the presentism of the written past: “In resisting the present, the historian demonstrates his true love of the past, a past that is all the more ‘adorable’ because it is untainted by the present and the practical.”⁷² Yet historians have always tried to keep this balance, and some of them, authors of durable works, have attained it, so that they have shown that the rhetorical operation of pulling the past into the present is, at least, possible. My point regarding the normative character of these durable historical texts comes from here, and it has to do with the distinction between historical and practical past that current critics have raised.

In his article “The Activity of Being an Historian,” Oakeshott notes three modes of experience corresponding to three modes of approaching the past: the practical, the contemplative, and the scientific.⁷³ The same modes govern our attitudes toward the past. Three different ways of perceiving the present are projected in three different pasts and different ways of viewing the past. Interestingly, each of these conveys the three transcendentals of reality defined by philosophers: the practical/professional would refer to goodness, the contemplative/poetic to beauty, and scientific/epistemic to truth. Truth (search for the reality of the past: the content of history), instruction (pedagogic function, history as a school of moral action: the uses of history), and beauty (aesthetics, style, method: the form of history) are the three categories engaged by historians.⁷⁴ The practical attitude—

70. Michael J. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 161, 164, and 165.

71. Original quote: “El sentido que se atribuye a las cosas al mirarlas es lo que incita oscuramente a la memoria a seleccionarlas para luego,” in Carmen Martín Gaité, *Cuadernos de todo* (Barcelona: Areté, 2002), 385.

72. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press), 174.

73. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 151-183.

74. See Herschel Baker, *The Race of Time: Three Lectures on Renaissance Historiography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967) and the three parts of this volume: “The Truth of History,” “The Use of History,” and “The Form of History,” which reflects the triple dimension I describe in the text.

proper to politicians, social scientists, and other professionals—understands the past in relation to the present. It seeks in the past the origins of whatever appears in the present. The past is used to improve the moral orientation of professions in order to obtain benefits for them or the society. It tends to presentism. The contemplative attitude, proper to artists and poets, is exemplified in its purest form in the historical novel, where the past is neither practical nor scientific but a storehouse of images. It has a strong aesthetic component. It tends to antiquarianism—its relative noun “antiquarian” refers to a dealer who negotiates with *nice* old objects. The scientific attitude, proper to scholars, considers the past a “foreign country”; it tries to establish distance from it and understand it by subsuming individual events and characters under general laws, so that the past it deals with is not the real past but a timeless world, a world made not of factual events, but of hypothetical situations. It tries to keep historical accuracy and referentiality. It should tend to an adequate equidistance between antiquarianism and presentism.

My point is that durable historical works are those that have attained this balance between the practical (historical goodness), the contemplative (historical beauty), and the scientific attitude, negotiating with real events of the past rather than fictional or imaginative ones (historical truth).

Reshaping Oakeshott’s arguments, some historians have recently retrieved the distinction between the practical and the historical past. Oakeshott’s original impulse was to distinguish professional history from other practical uses of the past, mainly to justify actions and beliefs in the present.⁷⁵ Hayden White has recently stressed the danger of history professionals becoming irrelevant for the society, which looks to the past for answers to questions of the present.⁷⁶ As Gertrude Himmelfarb puts it, historians have perpetually oscillated between the historical and the practical past: “the historical enterprise is in one sense exceedingly modest, aspiring to no large visions of enduring truths, producing only a kaleidoscope of changing pictures. In another sense, however, it is enormously ambitious, for it requires the historian to resist the overwhelming tendency of all time, and of the present time most especially.”⁷⁷

Durable historical works have attained this balance between the historical and the practical past so graphically illustrated by Himmelfarb’s paradox of the “modest-ambitious” historian. This paradox, which is at the heart of the historical operation, has been highlighted by Carlo Ginzburg: “The quantitative and anti-anthropocentric approach of the sciences of nature from Galileo onwards has placed human sciences in an unpleasant dilemma: they must either adopt a weak scientific standard so as to be able to attain significant results, or adopt a strong scientific standard to attain results of no great importance.”⁷⁸

When historians face the dilemma described by Himmelfarb and Ginzburg, the cognitive and epistemic dimension, bound with the content of historical narrations,

75. Michael Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 38–48.

76. Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014). See also Jonas Ahlskog, “Michael Oakeshott and Hayden White on the Practical and the Historical Past,” *Rethinking History* 20, no. 3 (2016), 1–20.

77. Himmelfarb, *The New History*, 174.

78. Carlo Ginzburg, “Roots of a Scientific Paradigm,” *Theory and Society* 7 (1979), 276.

should be “nonnegotiable,” since the “irreducible otherness of the past,” to use Spiegel’s phrase, must be preserved by historians.⁷⁹ Thus, to make this conviction of the irreducible otherness of the past compatible with the inescapable presentism of the written past, and its consequent balance between historical and practical past, is what makes the historical operation complex and explains the existence of very few durable historical works. Even among these few works, the balance between the historical and the practical is not always perfect, as we find some works that succeed more specifically in one of the two modes of approaching the past.

Actually, we can perceive in some of the historical works described in this article as “durable” the difficulty of achieving a perfect balance between the historical and the practical past. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* functions as a clear example of the practical mode, with his political and ideological engagement and his shaping of “history from below,” but is far from being in the contemplative mode. Davis, in her *Return of Martin Guerre*, is another prototype of the practical mode in her dialogical operation between a rural woman of sixteenth-century France (the past) and the theories around twentieth-century women (the present). Conversely, Braudel’s *Mediterranean*, Kantorowicz’s *The King’s Two Bodies*, and Huizinga’s *The Waning of the Middle Ages* are prototypical instances of analytic, interpretive, and contemplative engagement with the past, though they do not succeed in the practical mode.

Yet even within this inequality between the historical and the practical past, these works have achieved enough balance to be durable—as they manifestly are. After more than fifty years, Braudel’s *Mediterranean* is still clearly “a document, not a monument,” and the extraordinary interest in it probably lies in the ideal of a Mediterranean united beyond countries, races, ages, and religions, as well as in his concern with geography and environment.⁸⁰ Huizinga’s *Waning* has been defined as a “unique book [that] should be read today,” and the scope of the subjects treated (heroism, love, death, religion, symbolism, art) may easily be applied to all times via analogy, beyond the specific period the author is dealing with.⁸¹ *The King’s Two Bodies*’ main virtue has been summarized with the word *remain*.⁸² Kantorowicz, the scholar who did not wish to have any kind of funeral because of his “anti-eternity complex,” has achieved durability with his historical work.⁸³ The endurance of such a dense project may be explained by Kantorowicz’s clever use of metaphors. Metaphors are more than a simple rhetorical recourse; rather they have to be valued “as a supporting element, not only of language, but of reality itself.”⁸⁴ Both phrases of the title, *The King’s Two Bodies* and *Political Theology*, are metaphors themselves. They provide the book with

79. Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “The Task of the Historian,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 1 (2009), 1.

80. The quote is from John A. Marino, “Introduction,” in *Early Modern History and the Social Sciences: Testing the Limits of Braudel’s Mediterranean*, ed. John A. Marino (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2002), xviii.

81. The quote is from Kantor, *Inventing*, 381.

82. William C. Jordan, “Preface (1997),” in Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*, xiv.

83. The phrase “anti-eternity” is used, documented, and justified by Kantorowicz’s main biographer: Lerner, *Ernst Kantorowicz*, 387.

84. Ottavia Niccoli, “Images of Society,” in Marino, ed., *Early Modern History*, 101-122.

a multidisciplinary air that makes it readable from very different perspectives, and a sense of analogy between the past narrated and the reader's present: "The construction of the metaphor works by means of a linguistic movement through fluctuating meanings borrowed from several domains, without any necessary recourse to its political substance, to its referent."⁸⁵

In the end, all these historical works have the virtue of perdurability beyond their different gradation of *practicality* or *historicalness*. They embody serious research on the past (scientific mode with complete truth), intensive reflection on the present (practical mode with moral implications), and rhetorical presentation (contemplative mode with aesthetic accomplishment). They respect the inviolable pastness of the past (contemplative and scientific mode), but at the same time they are aware of the inescapable presentism of the written past (practical mode). Actually, it is a fact that historians such as Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Eusebius, Froissart, Guicciardini, Gibbon, Michelet, Ranke, Burckhardt, Bloch, Febvre, Thompson, Braudel, Duby, Davis, or Hayden White, to name some of them, have lived the present intensely, approached the past passionately, and hoped for the future.

When I was finishing my research, I decided to revisit, once more, Hayden White's *The Fiction of Narrative*. In his preface, he regrets that the scientization of history has led historians to a loss of the discipline's rhetorical and ethical dimension. Yet

very few of the great classics of historiography were undertaken out of disinterested motives, and most of them have been undertaken as a search, not so much for the truth of the past as, rather, a search for what the truth *means* for living people. Although the mode of history's presentation of the past is dramatic—laying out a spectacle of the great events and conflicts of times past—it has always sought to contribute to the question that Kant defined as the soul of ethics: What should I (we) do?⁸⁶

Historians have always tried to answer the questions that are the foundations of knowledge and wisdom: "What should we know?," "what should we do?" In historical texts, knowledge and ethics may be effectively complemented by imagination, aesthetics, and art. Thus, epistemic and ethics join aesthetics, as I have tried to argue in this article, to construct those durable works of historiography.

White adds, "modern scientific historiography has diminished the role of the imagination in the construction of a past that might be useful for helping living people to make that move."⁸⁷ And I wonder if, in an age of innovation that privileges schematic and *scientific* papers over monographs, and short messages via social media over articulated rationalizations, we will cease to create any durable historical works. Academia may become for historians a kind of straitjacket that precludes their saying much about the past and present. Historians are thus turning to unconventional ways of writing history, such as the use of new digital platforms and diverse forms of life-writing, simply to say things that they feel they cannot

85. Alain Boureau, *Kantorowicz: Stories of a Historian* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 98.

86. White, *The Fiction of Narrative*, xi.

87. *Ibid.*

say within the framework of academia.⁸⁸ Thus, using these new genres, historians try to deliberately break the rules of the game with conventional (and in some sense arbitrary) boundaries that keep historians and other scholars from sharing things they know, and to search for new paths to durability.

Certainly, we should welcome these news forms of history, since academic historical production requires, proportionally, academic reading able to reproduce the specific operations produced by it.⁸⁹ Yet history should never be totally assimilated to science, literature, or technology at the risk of losing that unifying “concept of history,” argued by Koselleck, that distinguishes its narrations from other nonhistorical or ahistorical accounts. To be sure, history, even being a crucial activity, will never have those universally known celebrity scientists such as Galileo, Newton, Einstein, or Hawking; philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, Augustine, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, or Heidegger; artists such as Phidias, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Van Gogh, or Picasso; writers such as Virgil, Dante, Cervantes, or Shakespeare. Ask people about the most outstanding historians ever and most people might have difficulty thinking of more than one or two, if any. This should be our condition, since I believe the text (the historical account) matters more than the author, and the object of study (the past) more than the historian. That is why in literature a classic may be in some sense synonymous with celebrity or popularity, whereas in history a classic should be synonymous with durability. Durability is thus the value where history and literature meet: “just as with the starry skies, the unreachable literary and historical epic past continues to delight us as a source of admiration and knowledge of otherwise inaccessible things, and as a dim but significant and enduring source of light, which will still be there for us once every other source has extinguished.”⁹⁰

To confirm these thoughts about the condition of historians, Spiegel has argued that being a historian lives in the writing, not in the posthumous life of a text.⁹¹ Yet the reality of the ephemeral duration of historians and of their historical texts is compatible with that other rhetorical reality of those few historical texts that have surpassed time. They have actually survived the facts they narrated: Huizinga’s *The Waning of Middle Ages* is a “unique book [that] should be read today”;⁹² “The end of the Mediterranean hegemony produces [Braudel’s] *The Mediterranean*, a text with its own hegemony, an object like the sea itself, difficult to know”;⁹³ “[*The King’s Two Bodies*] remains a wonderfully exciting and constantly rewarding book.”⁹⁴ They deserve to be kept, at least for instructive purposes. Kuhn once complained that there were no “science students encouraged to read the historical classics of their fields—works in which they might

88. I have tried to explore these new unconventional forms of history in Jaume Aurell, *Theoretical Perspectives on Historians’ Autobiographies* (London: Routledge, 2016) and *Rethinking Historical Genres in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jaume Aurell (London: Routledge, 2017).

89. Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Paris: Minuit, 1984), 35.

90. Dimitri Nikulin, “Establishing the Laws of History: Or, Why Tolstoy Is Not Homer,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophical Journal* 37, no. 2 (2016), 15.

91. From June 2018 email exchange with Gabrielle Spiegel.

92. Cantor, *Inventing*, 381.

93. Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 187.

94. Jordan, “Preface,” xv.

discover other ways of regarding the problems discussed in their textbooks, but in which they would also meet problems, concepts, and standards of solution that their future professions have long since discarded and replaced.”⁹⁵ Although they have different epistemic conditions, durable historical works have the same universal value of those scientific classics invoked by Kuhn, and we should keep reading them and advise our students to read them.

Aware of the difficulties of explaining the durability of historical texts, my aim with this essay has been, at least, to put this question on the agenda of historians and, more specifically, of theorists and critics of history. Approaching problems like this may help us to discern, in Hayden White’s words, “what is the use of criticism and especially meta-criticism in a field of study like history,” which leads him to the conclusion that “it is imperative to have cadres of scholars and intellectuals who specialize in what might be called the social import of fields of creative production like literature and the rest of the arts. Not in order to regulate them, but to provide opinions on the nature and consequences of their products. Thus, [Frank] Kermode concluded, literary critics and theorists do the *serious* reading for community.”⁹⁶

As Hans Kellner put it, the operation of criticism on historical writings “is crucial—who reads histories, and who writes them.”⁹⁷ Thus, following the universal aspiration to *le dur désir de durer*—what one critic has poetically defined as “the harsh contrivance of spirit against death, the hope to overreach time by force of creation”⁹⁸—it would be unfortunate to lose that magical place, inhabited by those historical perdurable works imagined by Georges Duby when he was rereading Braudel’s *Mediterranean*: “I have the feeling that the books’ riches are inexhaustible, like one of those palaces that one finds on the coast of Amalfi, palaces through which one can wander endlessly along porticoed galleries nobly arrayed in terraces overlooking the sea.”⁹⁹

To be sure, durable historical works are those audible voices among the many implicit appropriations that we historians do in our work, as conveyed by Peter Burke’s metaphor: “Fortunately, a few voices remain audible, among them the deep bass of Braudel.”¹⁰⁰ Let us try to keep those voices alive, and to create new worlds like those Duby imagined.

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95. Kuhn, *The Essential Tension*, 229.

96. Hayden White, “Foreword,” in Kalle Pihlainen, *The Work of History* (New York: Routledge, 2017), xi.

97. Hans Kellner, “Comment on Aurell’s paper,” 5 (manuscript presented at the Conference “Writing as Historical Practice,” Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, May 18-19, 217).

98. George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 21.

99. Georges Duby, *History Continues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 85-86.

100. Peter Burke, “Civilizations and Frontiers: Anthropology of the Early Modern Mediterranean,” in Marino, ed. *Early Modern History*, 141.