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“The Civic Responsibilities of Historians”

Ladies and gentlemen, I am honoured to have been invited to give this lecture, and by way of setting it in a suitably elevated context, I want to begin with some striking remarks made by Chateaubriand about Napoleon. They were published in the newspaper, *Le Mercure*, on 4 July 1807.

When, in the silence of abjection, the only sounds to be heard are the chains of the slave or the voice of the informer, when everything trembles before the tyrant and when incurring his favour is as dangerous as falling into disgrace, the historian appears, charged with the vengeance of the people. Nero prospered in vain, because already, under the empire, Tacitus had been born.

‘The historian charged with the vengeance of the people’: the call to assume this role is majestic, almost frightening. What does it mean? Nothing less than putting the historian in the front-line of service to liberty, truth and the nation.

Now I must hasten to say that there is a simple (and perhaps prudent) way of protecting oneself against the anxiety that a member of our profession might feel when faced with such an overwhelming mission. That is to accept from the start that this idea of the responsibility of the historian has long since been rejected by many, either because they contest the very notion of civic interest, or because they do not believe the historian capable of assuming it.

At the heart of this rejection is a belief – found frequently in Antiquity, particularly with the Greeks – that there are many occasions in the history of peoples where silence about the past is a duty. After dramatic events, periods of oppression or civil discord, it becomes necessary to emphasize reconciliation. Remember Sophocles in *Antigone*, when the darkness of hatred among the protagonists draws to an end, and the choir cries: ‘Today’s combats must forever be forgotten!’ This is telling the historian to shut up. It’s a particularly blunt way of questioning our role.

In Athens, at the end of the fifth century, such silence was systematically organised. In 403, after the bloody dictatorship of the Thirty and the military defeat of Athens, when the democrats returned to the city, they proclaimed a general reconciliation and passed a decree forbidding ‘remembrance of the misfortunes’ (*mnésikakeîn*). They obliged all Athenians to take an oath never to evoke the recent terrible struggles. It applied to everyone without exception – the democrats, the oligarchs, and those called the ‘quiet people’: the ones who had ‘lived’ through the period concerned without taking sides. The determination to seal the democratic consensus was thus based on a duty of silence. Aristotle even claims that the moderate Archinos, who returned to Athens with the democrats, condemned to death a citizen who had broken this promise, and he recounts that after this example, nobody else took the risk. Isocrates – who was 33 years old in 403 – wrote:

Because we have made mutual guarantees to each other, we govern ourselves in as fine and collective a manner as if no misfortune had ever afflicted us.

In contrast to such a position, the historian embodies the refusal to forget, even though this might threaten the emotional and moral unity of the collectivity.

As you will understand, I have only a distant knowledge of the debates that have stirred up the historians in your country over the past twenty years or so – since the bicentenary of European settlement – over the vital question of your collective memory of the relations between the colonisers and the indigenous peoples. But from what I have learned, thanks especially to the work of Stuart Macintyre, I know that the issue of the role of historians is not unfamiliar to you.

In particular, I noted with interest the statement of your former Prime Minister, John Howard, who declared after his 1996 electoral triumph: ‘One of the more insidious developments in Australian political life over the past decade or so has been the attempt to rewrite Australian history in the service of a partisan political cause.’ He was posing – in a polemical manner – the central question of the historian’s role and motivations in a democracy. Because he did not like what they wrote, the Honorable John Howard was claiming these historians to be politically biased, and even that their writing did not respect the facts. And yet, if I understand it rightly, this work was – in the eyes of the academics that the prime minister found so profoundly irritating – both scientifically and civically well founded.

To demand silence about unwelcome source materials, Mr Howard could perhaps have called upon the poet Paul Valéry. Long after Isocrates, Valéry launched a brutal attack on History that has become almost hackneyed in France but is perhaps less well known here. He claimed that if ‘history is the most dangerous product that the alchemy of the intellect has created’, it is because ‘it intoxicates peoples, engenders false memories in them, exaggerates their reflexes, preserves their old wounds, and torments them in their rest.’ For Valéry, historians are particularly noxious not only because they open old scars, but because they can justify more or less anything. So there we are: the problem is fairly sharply posed.

Before tackling it, however, we need to take one last precaution, by distinguishing between this question and the question of a historian’s personal individual political engagement – whether through intervention in civic debate or direct involvement in the political arena.

You will understand that my examples are French ones. It is instructive to consider, over the long term, the successive waves of historians, in France, who chose at various moments, to get personally involved in public affairs. Take the generation of 1820 for

example, which established itself in opposition to Louis XVIII and then Charles X. This is the generation of Guizot, Thiers, Mignet and Augustin Thierry. For them, as Guizot observes in his *Mémoires*, history offered an arsenal of arguments against reactionary politics. They deliberately used their knowledge and their personal *savoir-faire* to strengthen their positions in the conflicts of the public forum. To such an extent that Guizot, for instance, made no distinction between his historical writing and his circumstantial and polemical texts. A century later, when one looks at the list of members of the Committee of Vigilance against fascism in the 1930s, one notes the large number of historians involved in it. Later still, I remember that, as a student in the Latin Quarter, at the end of the Fourth Republic or the very beginning of the Fifth, I attended a meeting against the Algerian War where three of our Sorbonne lecturers spoke against repression. They had abandoned for a time the podium from which they ordinarily addressed us.

But that kind of activity is different from the subject I want to explore with you, which is the responsibility of historians as they exercise their intellectual and professional activity, charged by the collectivity to which they belong to organise shared memory, to cast

light on the common past, and to reflect on the traces it has left. In doing so, they may choose to cut themselves carefully off from contemporary politics, and moreover, while we can identify moments where historians intervene directly in domestic or international political life, we can also find moments of withdrawal or mistrust. This happened for instance in the 1920s in Europe, which saw academic historians withdrawing from the political struggles as a reaction against the orgy of nationalism, even though – and I’ll come back to this – most of them had been participants in it during the Great War.

It remains the case that historians, however prudent they set themselves up to appear, can never completely escape the problem of their civic responsibility, because their entire intellectual activity is affected by it. They cannot ever get away from the possibility that their work will have major political consequences, by virtue of the fact that they are working on the past, and that the presence of that past – notwithstanding the views of the Greeks in 403 – always weighs heavily (and I don’t think this is a negative thing) in the debates and sensitivities that weave the life of a democracy.

Consequently, their responsibility is a great one – unless they choose to limit themselves to the superficial satisfaction of anecdotal history. I see the management of this responsibility as requiring three lines of approach. Firstly, historians must contribute to the truth about humankind – what it has been, and hence what it is. Secondly, there is the need to clarify ideas, in the service of those who engage in action. And finally they must serve the identity of the nation to which they belong. This third role, as we shall see, is the most ambiguous.

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The truth about humankind? Now that, assuredly, is rather daunting.

I would like here to evoke the figure of Pierre Vidal-Naquet, who has just died: perhaps you know how emblematic his trajectory was, both as a man of erudition and as a citizen. In his memoirs, he recounts that it was the text of Chateaubriand that I quoted at the beginning that made him decide, while he was still an adolescent, to become a historian. He specialised – brilliantly – in the study of Ancient Greece, but this knowledge of Antiquity did not prevent him subsequently, in various grave national situations, from applying the rules of his trade to contemporary analyses of great civic

importance. I would say that it even led to it. I think of his combat during the Algerian War, in the affair of the mathematician Maurice Audin, who was assassinated by the French Army. Or the role he played later in the struggle against the negationism that was casting doubt on the existence of the gas chambers. Or again, more recently, when he played on resonances with Antiquity to block the offensive led by certain suspect authors who were trying to sully the memory of Jean Moulin, the leader and hero of the French Resistance.

Obviously the society of historians cannot claim any monopoly in bringing the truth to light, based on some professional know-how. That would be ridiculous. But it seems to me that there would be cause for guilt if historians did not, in such circumstances, contribute to the separation of truth and falsehood.

I would like to spend a moment on the Dreyfus Affair. As you know, this fundamental confrontation has played a central role in the history of contemporary France because it saw the violent conflict between two visions of the nation. There were those, on the Right, who believed that the national interest had priority over anything else. And there were those, on the Left – every bit as patriotic as the others (it was less than thirty years since the

dramatic 1871 defeat by the Prussians) – who believed that the greatness of the nation would wither away if its defence depended on a violation of human rights. They saw these rights as a national responsibility towards the whole of humanity and as the very foundation of democracy. I can't help thinking that your recent History Wars – albeit in a less immediately dramatic mode – are not without some echo of this episode, which for us was foundational. And it is pertinent for my topic today, because it awoke in various French historians the determination to intervene in public life as historians, drawing on their professional practice.

At the trial of Emile Zola, a certain number of academic historians appeared, and attacked the false conclusions of the sorry Alphonse Bertillon – the man who, because of his anti-Semitic prejudice, had peremptorily confused the handwriting of the falsely accused Captain Dreyfus, and that of Esterhazy, the real traitor. Archivists and historians appeared in court to refute Bertillon's competence by using their training in the analysis of texts (both form and content), skills which are at the heart of our profession. It required a lot of moral courage, because the pressure from the nationalists, both in the press and in the streets, was strong enough to shake even the

most confident temperaments. The historians were splendidly effective, and their steady-headed certainty about where their duty lay finally led, after much ado, to the triumph of justice and truth and the establishment of Dreyfus's innocence.

There is much talk today about 'social demand' – it's a term very much in vogue in France. Historians – and if my reading of your texts is accurate, I think it happens here, too – are more and more being called upon to intervene in controversial matters, for the benefit of citizens. In France, the very long aftermath of the collaboration with the Nazi occupation has led to various spectacular trials. I shall cite in particular the one of a former prefect of Marshall Pétain's Vichy regime, Maurice Papon. After the Liberation, Papon had a brilliant career under various governments before his role in the deportation of Jews was revealed. This trial had a big impact on the French national consciousness. Now, among my colleagues who are specialists of the period, a fundamental debate arose, a debate which raises a fascinating ethical issue: should historians accept, or not, to go before a tribunal to use their professional competence to enlighten members of the jury about such a distant period, and to shape the jury's

judgement about a prefect's freedom of action, and hence his legal, civic and human responsibility?

Personally, I approved of those who responded affirmatively, while respecting those who think that a historian's place should never be in the courts, which by their very nature make black or white judgements, without the multiple nuances that we work with, and with quite different rituals and obligations from those that reign over historical research in the ivory tower.

Personally, I consider that historians would be failing in their duty if they refused this task of bringing the truth to light when the public interest especially demands it. Clearly, it is also the responsibility of the justice system to draw out truth: does this mean there is competition when a judgement has a historical dimension? I think it's probably possible to draw a line distinguishing the respective duties: if there is a crime or misdemeanor concerning the norms and laws of the national community, the historian can help define the responsibility of those implicated; but only the judges can reach conclusions in respect to possible punishment.

This notion of historical ‘expertise’ is difficult to handle. But it becomes clear if we consider that it can and must help the moral, civic and legal judgement process to better understand and, potentially, to reach better conclusions. It can do this firstly by scrutinising the freedom of action of the protagonists, so that the diversity of possibilities they have faced can be reconstructed moment by moment. I think the very heart of our mission is in fact this constant effort, against the temptations of anachronism, to reconstruct what, at each successive moment, has been the freedom of those involved.

This is why, moreover, the historians of my generation are often interested in the notion of uchronia. Utopia is the place which does not exist. Uchronia is the time that has not happened. A French philosopher, Charles Renouvier, one of the guiding lights of our Third Republic, published a book in 1857 with this title, *Uchronia*. Under the subtitle ‘A History of European civilisation as it was not, but might have been’, this philosopher posited that the Christians – a sect coming out of Asia like so many others – had failed to win the souls of the Western world. He undertook to reconstruct our history from this postulate.

Other forms of uchronia have been taken up, less ambitious ones, starting with small, even minute changes. What would have happened during the Second World War if Churchill's plane had been shot down by German fighters over the Channel in June 1940? What would have happened if, during the assassination attempt of 20 July 1944, someone had not moved the satchel containing the bomb, and Hitler had been killed?

I have raised the question of uchronia because it seems to me that what can at first appear as a silly mind game is in fact a fruitful exercise for anyone trying to reflect on the links between individual and collective behaviour. This restitution of all the possibilities that have been set aside in the final train of events can be significantly enlightening. At the nexus of history and morality, it can illuminate the freedom of the protagonists, which is what historians must evaluate and make known – if we are to be faithful to the mainstay of our professional and civic ambition of serving the truth about humanity.

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The second mission of historians in a democracy, as I see it, is to help clarify the thought of those engaged in political action. As a stimulus, we can return to the severity of Paul Valéry, who in the

text I quoted earlier, affirmed that the work of historians made nations ‘bitter, arrogant and vain.’

We can readily concede to Valéry that precedents, if politicians become obsessed by them, can paralyse their understanding of situations. Tocqueville, in his *Souvenirs*, reproached Louis-Philippe for letting himself be ‘deceived by the false light that the history of earlier facts casts on the present time.’

At the risk of appearing paradoxical, I would claim that the task of historians is precisely to warn political agents against the fascination of repetition, by reminding them that nothing ever begins again in the same way, and that what follows is always new. One day in 1790, in the Constitutive Assembly, a deputy interrupted a speech that was drawing extensively on the lessons of Ancient Rome. ‘Sir!’ he cried, ‘History is not our code!’

Prudence and irony are needed to deal with the use that politicians can make of the large reservoir of situations and diverse positions that the past offers: we know how readily they can isolate a given fragment of an event that could easily be refuted by another, if only they should care to mention it.

It is certainly not up to the historian to be the obliging furnisher of this arsenal of arguments that bring comfort and

dynamism to politicians. But conversely, historians have to know that the history they write can and must play an essential role in enlightening these same political actors in the exercise of their power. Here, I'm tempted to play Polybius against Valéry – Polybius who was quoted to good effect by Nietzsche in his celebrated 1874 study on *The Uses and Abuses of History for Life*. 'The study of political history,' wrote Polybius, 'is the best preparation for governing the state, and it is also the best discipline to give us the forbearance to put up with the capriciousness of fortune.'

In all democracies, we can see that the politicians who most clearly leave their mark are those with historical ballast, and that those who are not are almost always, like boats without keels, condemned to float on the surface of events without really influencing them.

This responsibility of historians obviously has to be extended beyond leaders to the entire body of citizens, citizens who are educated in history through books, the press, the audio-visual media, and first of all through school.

History as civic education... Certainly it is not a question of dropping some kind of revealed truth on our compatriots from on high. Rather, our task is to help sharpen their perception, by

teaching the diversity of choices, the chains of events, the rhythms of duration in time.

In the midst of the avalanche of information that modern media technology has intensified for all of us, the most effective citizens of tomorrow, the wisest, will be those who have learned – thanks first and foremost to history (what a responsibility!) – how better to classify, order and organise the complexity of the world which will be fashioned by their choices, their behaviour and their votes.

They will learn that collective life does not operate in straight lines and that it is constructed according to complex rhythms – some slow and profound, some developing over the middle term, others again rapid and superficial; they will learn that it is all these rhythms together that, at any given moment, delineate the field of each person's individual freedom within the life of the collectivity. This can readily be applied, in any nation, to all sorts of questions thrown up by current events: for instance, among others, the sacrifices that each individual must make for the national defence, or the policy of solidarity towards the most needy, or the relations between society and religions, or the role of justice and the

nature of punishment, or the tax system, and – in a more enduring way – the balance between the State and the market.

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I have one last area to consider, which is perhaps the most important, namely the links between our profession and the question of national identity. Alphonse Aulard, the famous historian of the French Revolution wrote in 1903: ‘History will always remain the nation becoming aware of itself.’ And there we are at the core of the issue of unity or ‘divisions’ evoked by Paul Valéry.

In the first decades of the Third Republic in France, all of historiography was influenced by a kind of secular pope, a ‘national school-master’ called Ernest Lavisse. For a long time, Lavisse dominated the teaching of future citizens, through his hefty university-level *History of France*, right down to the primary school textbooks that, under his name, were distributed by the millions. This teaching was based entirely on the tenet that historical judgement had the right to sort the events of the past in a simple and peremptory fashion: the good was what favoured national unity; the bad was what got in its way or threatened it.

A tension with universal values results from this attitude, because of the risk that history is putting itself in the service not of

patriotism but of patriotism's degraded caricature, nationalism. I have already mentioned this tension, from another angle, in relation to the Dreyfus Affair. In relation to the First World War, in our countries given over to the barbarous folly of a European civil war – and I'm not forgetting the price paid by Australia – we could put together a very sad anthology of the excesses of historians carried away by their patriotism. It applied to both camps, and sometimes involved the most unreasonable attitudes, to the point of dishonouring the intelligence of the authors.

I have read that you knew something of this phenomenon here in the same period, and that without going to those extremes, your great Ernest Scott, celebrated in this university, put his academic reputation at risk in his service to the Australian cause. In the other direction, we need to salute the efforts of those historians on both sides of the Rhine, who in the 1920s and 1950s, sought to bring convergence to the French and German textbooks, thanks to a dialogue undertaken in a spirit not of forgetting but of peace.

From another angle, a nation is also the history of its conflicts and in some cases of its collective crimes – in other words of the way memory is worked over by history. I only know about your History Wars from the outside, and you won't be surprised if I

use the example of the historians of Germany and their grappling with the issue of the collective responsibility of the entire people in the flowering and perpetuation of Nazism and its criminal barbarities. But I'll also point to a situation that is closer to yours, namely the controversies in the United States and Canada that for several decades now have sprung up around the intervention of historians in the legal confrontations over the rights claimed by the descendants of the Indians who signed particular treaties with their conquerors. In their eyes, these treaties confer special rights that fall outside the common regulations – hunting and fishing rights, for example.

In North America things are further complicated, in civic and moral terms, because many of our colleagues have accepted to be paid by one side or the other to defend their respective thesis. I remember rejecting, a few years ago, an offer made by lawyers for cigarette manufacturers in anticipation of future trials. They were asking me to certify, from documents that they would give me, that in the 1950s smokers were already perfectly aware of the risks they were running, and that consequently, no responsibility could be imputed to the firms concerned. You can see how slippery the

ground is, from the point of view both of the ethics of the profession and of the public interest.

Along this line, and more broadly, it is illuminating to consider those special moments that constitute commemorations – when a nation crystallises chronological chance to reflect on itself, and, in the best of cases, to cast light on the deep forces that have slowly created a state of ‘wanting-to-live-together’.

I hope you’ll forgive me for taking a French example once again. I was charged by President Mitterrand, in 1989, to organise the commemoration of the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. It was a privileged occasion for reflecting on the situation of historians, on their role, and their responsibility in such circumstances.

At the time, I felt that a comparison with the two earlier commemorations, in 1889 and 1939, would be instructive. In 1889, Alphonse Aulard (the Revolution historian I mentioned earlier), stated explicitly: ‘I wanted at once to teach and practice the French Revolution by serving knowledge and serving the Republic.’ The whole question was to know if at certain moments, given the dramas and passions of the past, there wouldn’t be a contradiction between

those two goals. In truth, during that first Centenary, the historians' action was characterised by sufficient fervour for them not to feel any contradiction or discomfort. The University was on the radical left, with a neo-Kantian orientation, and honoring the memory of the Revolution was a way of honoring the Republic, which was seen as the balanced, peaceful and ultimately successful incarnation of the generous ideals of 1789.

In 1939, at the time of the hundred and fiftieth anniversary, instead of agreement and fervour, what dominated was rather awkwardness and discord, because of the weaknesses of the European democracies, which were beginning to doubt themselves in the face of the totalitarian ideologies. The attempt was made to mobilise historians to celebrate the so-called 'transatlantic revolutions' and to emphasise the links between the United States and France at the end of the eighteenth century (in an effort to attract the sympathy and support of Roosevelt's America). But this provoked a lot of reticence, not because of sympathy for fascism (though there were some exceptions), but because the profession did not feel carried by a sufficiently strong wave of collective determination to set aside their academic scruples and to descend into the arena.

As for the 1989 Bicentenary, I was too involved in it to have the necessary critical distance. But it seems to me that, helped by the precedents, we managed to achieve a good balance between historical research and the civic implications of the event. The mission I headed imposed a careful and strict separation between the scientific historiographical work – which the State kept its nose out of, even though it provided subsidies – and, on the other hand, the explicitly political task of crystalising deep hopes for the benefit of a certain idea of the French nation as a unique and universal entity in the real world.

What I have been able to read, at the time and since, about the way Australia organised the celebration of the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of the nation, suggests to me that, notwithstanding the specificities of our two countries, you must have confronted problems somewhat similar to ours – especially in the light of your debates about the relations between colonists and the indigenous populations.

The issue goes beyond commemorations. In France, there have recently been sharp reactions to a law voted by the right-wing majority in the context of a much-needed and belated renewal of the

historiography of French colonisation. This law imposed on the teachers in our junior and senior highschools the obligation to teach – and I quote – the ‘positive aspects’ of colonisation. Quite a number of us responded that it was certainly not through a law that historians could be forced to have a balanced approach and that this text, therefore, was nothing more than a party-political injunction. I must say that when I saw that your former Prime Minister, Mr Howard, had sought in 1999 to introduce into the preamble of your constitution the statement that ‘Australians are free to be proud of their country and heritage’, I had a reaction bordering on the incredulous.

In France, a great controversy has developed around what we call ‘memorial laws’ – laws that seek to shape the national memory. Whether they are passed by the Right or the Left, they claim to tell the truth about historical facts in the name and interest of the French nation. One of them has recognised the Armenian genocide, another has defined slavery and black slave trading (the western practice, rather than the Arab practice) as a crime against humanity. The critique of the historians has moreover reached back as far as a 1990 law, the so-called Gayssot law which punished negationism, the negation of the gas chambers under the Nazis.

Against these 'memorial' laws, we created an association called Liberty for History, under the presidency of the great René Rémond, who was my master. After his death, Pierre Nora became president. Neither of these men can be accused of being carried away by excessive emotion.

Our conviction is that it is not the place of lawmakers to regulate the work of history in this way. You should not see this as self-protection by the profession. One does not need a university label to write good history. Negationism is ignominious. But if it has faded, it is because of the work of courageous colleagues, not because of laws, and moreover, before that law, we had plenty of legal means of punishing anti-Semitism. For us, it is absolutely unacceptable from a civic point of view, that successive and possibly contradictory parliamentary majorities should make determinations of that sort about the interpretation of the past, relying on some transient and chance notion of the national interest. It is not only an offence to that intellectual freedom that the Republic must guarantee. It is also a peril to the dignity of a democracy in relation to its past. Patriotism, in truth, while a precious value, should take up its abode elsewhere.

By way of conclusion, I would like to give the final word to another great historian, Gabriel Monod, who founded the *Revue historique* in 1876. Monod was a strict Protestant, and as such was more than most preoccupied with the ethical and civic foundations of his discipline. In an article on the progress of the science of history since the sixteenth century, he set about formulating a synthesis of the different duties I have outlined:

Without proposing any goal, any purpose other than the benefit to truth, history, in a mysterious and sure way, works towards the greatness of the nation and at the same time towards the progress of humanity.

No doubt, like him and like me, a century and a half later, you can feel how difficult the conciliation of these two objectives will always be. But in the end, it is perhaps that challenging task that gives our profession its savour, its scope, and, in the best of cases, when we succeed in fulfilling it, its virtue.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your kind attention.