

WRIT 1401

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What is History?

A Critical Appraisal of Edward Hallet Carr's "The Historian and His Facts"

Throughout my childhood in the relatively young country of Pakistan, I've been consistently exposed to two very different sides of the same history: that present in the British textbooks we were made to read in school and the accounts of those around me who had lived or whose ancestors had lived during those times. The incongruity of these accounts was what first caused me to be skeptical of the idea of a factual, objective history. However, it was not until reading Edward Hallett Carr's essay, "The Historian and His Facts," that I saw my own skepticism take a strong form and gain validation. In this essay, Carr seeks to show the reader how accounts of the past can never be divorced from interpretation while simultaneously grappling with larger questions of 'What is a historical fact?' and 'What is history?'. Though somewhat pretentious, the argument Carr presents is compelling. Through organized explanation and the extensive use of examples, rhetorical questions, emphatic language and metaphors, the essay effectively illustrates the complexity and dynamic nature of what we think of as history and its relationship to the facts that constitute it.

The essay is very reminiscent of the opening speech of a parliamentary debate, in which the speaker is so utterly convinced of his own argument that he belittles any other way of viewing things. In any other setting, such an approach would detract from what the author had to say because it would make it seem that the counter argument has not been fully considered. Here however, it works to Carr's advantage, as he is challenging beliefs that have been deeply ingrained

in the human psyche for so long and addressing questions that many others would not have bothered to think about in the first place. His snarky tone acts, therefore as a much-needed rude awakening.

As is typical of a debate, the author begins by establishing the context and premises upon which the argument is being made. Carr does this by first outlining (in an utterly unsympathetic way) the prevailing nineteenth-century/positivist view on facts and history—what he calls the common-sense school of history—so that he may refute it later. According to this view, ‘history consists of a corpus of ascertained facts’ that are simply to be “collect[ed] and serve[ed]” by the historian (Carr 26). He cites numerous examples and quotations to indicate the pervasiveness of this ideology and uses figurative language to help the reader understand his point—a technique which he draws upon several times throughout the essay. Though he hasn’t even begun his argument, he makes his distaste for this outlook evident through his use of negative emotive words and descriptions such as “presupposes,” “not very profound aphorism,” and “anxious to stake their claim.” (26). The one assumption that he admits to making in his argument—that the details of certain well known historical events can be thought of as true—may seem obvious to the reader, but his description of this as a “bold and not very plausible assumption” makes it seem as though he is granting them a merciful concession (26). This implies that there is already a lot more to history than he can explain within the scope of this essay.

Following this brief introduction, Carr jumps directly into the thick of things. He makes his opinion crystal clear in the phrase “Now this clearly will not do” (26). The confidence he displays in his assertions compels the reader to place their trust in him. He opens his discussion here and in other parts of the essay by first posing a profound rhetorical question (in this case,

‘What is a historical fact?’) and then proceeding to explain it himself (27). This strategy is effective as it puts Carr in a position of power whilst keeping the reader engaged.

The remainder of his argument is very structured (like a debate). Carr presents two separate sets of points/observations, allocating a separate paragraph to each point and supporting it with a metaphorical explanation, credible example(s) or both. He addresses the points in sequence, numbering them as he goes to prevent the reader/listener from getting lost along the way.

The first set of observations is in response to the question “What is a historical fact?” (27). Here, he refutes the “common-sense view” that facts form the “backbone of history” by pointing out first that facts constitute “the necessary raw materials of the historian rather than of history itself” and second that the “necessity to establish these basic facts rests on...*a priori* decision of the historian” (26). He skillfully uses figurative language to illustrate these two points more clearly. For the first one, he compares the use of accurate facts by a historian to the use of “well-seasoned timber or properly mixed concrete” by an architect—an excellent tangible representation of facts as “raw materials” (26). For his second point, he references Pirandello’s description of a fact being like “a sack—it won’t stand up until you [the historian] put something in it” (27). To make the distinction even clearer, he addresses the reader/listener directly (a tactic that makes them feel engaged and put on the spot) and compares ordinary events from their lives, which are unlikely to go down in history, to well-known historical events that involve historical figures doing similar things. The use of surprising and emphatic language here, such as “preposterous fallacy,” “gallantly attempted to rescue,” and that “petty stream the Rubicon” make his point yet more poignant (27). Another way that Carr elaborates his point and facilitates the readers’ understanding is by using a recent example to walk the reader through the process by which an ordinary fact

makes its way to becoming a historical fact—thereby demonstrating how no fact—however simple it may be—can lack an element of interpretation.

The second set of points addresses the limitations of historians and indirectly or history itself. Though still pretentious, it is interesting to note that Carr's use of language in this part of the essay does nothing to suggest that he is bitter about of these limitations (thereby making his self-righteousness seem less offensive to the reader). His objective seems to be to simply make the reader aware of them so as not to delude themselves by taking everything they hear about the past at face value.

The first point he makes in this part of the essay is that historical facts “cannot exist in pure form: they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder” (27). Here, he uses the example of an esteemed historian, Trevelyan, to illustrate his point. Though Carr appears to assume much about Trevelyan's bias towards the Whig tradition, he doesn't blame him for it. In fact, he states that reading it against that background is the only way to understand “the full meaning and significance” of the work and describes historians that don't individualize their work as “dumb dog[s]” (27). Carr advises his listeners, “study the historian before you study the facts”. Here again, he masterfully employs figurative language to explain his point—drawing upon metaphors that he used in the beginning of his essay to describe the “common sense” view of history and changing them to support his own views. The most notable and elaborate of these metaphors is the one which compares facts to fish. The common-sense approach to history likens facts to fish that are already on a fishmonger's slab—ready to be prepared and served by the historian. Carr, on the other hands describes these fish as “swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean”(27). The historian is not only the cook, but also the fisherman, who *tries to catch the sort of fish he wants* through his own personalized techniques.

The second limitation he highlights is the inability of the historian to possess what Carr calls an “imaginative understanding” of all the subjects about whom he writes. He holds this lack of understanding responsible for the weakness of medieval history in the nineteenth century and the senseless/one-sided portrayal of the Soviet Union’s intentions by English historians and vice versa. Though it appears that Carr has drawn these conclusions himself, the way in which he explains them makes them seem perfectly logical, especially since the examples are ones that the 1961, post-Cold-War audience for which this piece was written are likely to have been familiar with/witnessed in their lifetimes.

The third and final limitation Carr speaks of is that a historian can only view the past through the eyes of the present. Here Carr becomes across as a bit arrogant and sarcastic—deliberately using harsh words and formal language to state things that would otherwise seem obvious, for example: “The historian is of his own age and is bound to it by the conditions of human existence” or “It requires only a superficial knowledge...” (28). He expresses frustration and demeans the deluded attempts of other historians to cheat themselves into the past—mocking them by likening their use of obsolete words to delivering their lectures “in a *chlamys* or *toga*” and comparing their supposed love of the past to “the nostalgic romanticism of old men”(28). Although his tone in this part of the essay may have been a little too harsh, Carr’s sentiments are very impactfully conveyed. In-keeping with his debate-like/academic/pedantic style, Carr cites relevant and well-known historical examples to support his point.

Lest the reader be misled (and perhaps to show them that his approach, though new, is not radical), before concluding his essay, Carr warns them of the dangers of adopting the alternate extreme perspective, in which “the facts of history are nothing [and] interpretation is everything” (29). To demonstrate this point of view, he quotes other historians who have held it. Carr argues

here that this is approach is “surely as untenable as the first” (28). He engages the readers minds/imagination by using a metaphor of a mountain to say that, though (like history), it can be viewed from an infinite number of angles, this does not give it an infinite number of shapes. He cites his own experience as a historian having read “too many examples of extravagant interpretation riding roughshod over facts” as evidence to support his point (29). Few words are spent dwelling over this counterargument though, presumably because it is less widespread.

The last part of the essay marks a conscious shift in the tone and style of the writer. Here as well, he transitions to the last section of the essay by posing an essential rhetorical question: “How then, in the middle of the twentieth century are we supposed to define the obligation of the historian to his facts?” (29). The use of this rhetorical question is particularly impactful because Carr manages to echo the thoughts of the reader who, having come to this point in the essay, must be wondering what all Carr’s points will amount to. Following this, his tone becomes conversational—softening the harsh impression he may have made in the preceding paragraphs. He begins speaking in first person and addressing the audience directly. His explanations become personal and unique to his own experiences and struggles. This shows that his arrival at and understanding of this question has been a long process, which he has achieved after years of experience in the field. Despite this evident shift in tone, Carr manages to neatly tie together the concrete points he has made throughout the essay. He acknowledges the complexity of recording history—referring to it as a to the “precarious situation” of navigating between the “untenable theory of history as an objective compilation of facts” and the ‘equally untenable theory of history as the subjective product of the mind” (29). Rather than stopping after proving his point (of history not existing outside of the realm of interpretation), he brings his essay around in full circle and uses his conclusions to answer the rhetorical questions he posed at the very beginning of the essay.

And his way of answering it, could not have been more effective. In the last metaphor of this essay, he likens the relationship between a historian and his facts to the (very understandable/relatable) relationship between a human being and his environment—neither one “totally independent” or “unconditionally subject” to the other. He ends, rather impactfully by finally answering the question: “What is history?” (30). His answer is this: ‘[history is] a continuous process between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past’.

Overall, I found Carr’s essay was successful in convincing the reader that facts cannot exist outside of the realm of interpretation and in defining history within that context. In the span of a few pages, he manages to initiate a discussion on a complex and frequently neglected topic, introduce his own (unconventional) views on the topic and support and explain these views masterfully through the extensive use of examples and literary devices. The essay follows a logical sequence and is packed with relevant metaphors and facts. It systematically weaves together the diverse elements that constitute “history”—unifying reading and writing, the personal and the practical, the subjective and the objective into a vast, dynamic body of knowledge and understanding. His position at the end does justice to the complexity of the issue and provides historians and students of history a substantial framework to work with. Though my personal experiences with differing interpretations of history may have made me more inclined than the average reader to accept Carr’s point of view (and perhaps to be less overwhelmed by his harsh tone)—his essay still managed to increase my appreciation of history and the process by which it is recorded. I realize now, that the many differing views on Pakistan’s history are not testament to the irregularity/unreliability of history. Instead, they all form crucial pieces, meant to bring us

closer to a comprehensive (asymptotic) understanding of the past. I also realize, more importantly, that I still have much to learn.

Work Cited

Carr, Edward Hallet. "The Historian and His Facts." *The Harper & Row Reader*, edited by Marshall W. Gregory and Wayne C. Booth, HarperCollins, 1992, pp.784-794.