

Pete Ahrens

Landscapes: The Dual Discourse of Historiography

The Nexus of the Present

I stand on a floating island of *now*, surrounded by the twilit horizon of the turbulent sea of *not-now*. My view of the past is only slightly less ruled by chaos than my view of the future. There is just enough light to think I can see something.

The light reflects off my island, the present, finite but unbounded like the surface of a sphere, or the life of a sentient being. But the present does not enclose any volume. *Now* is also like a bending plane rising through space, above it, the onrushing space of the future, below it, the receding space of the past, each incomprehensibly infinite. I do not know whether my island plunges into the future, or the future rushes by me into the past. The strange reality of *now* is change. The present is a region of flux, an interface of information, a location of discourse.

If I look at these three dissimilar but oddly joined spaces, I observe that I know nothing about the future because no information comes from there. It is in a state of maximum entropy. There is nothing to speak of. I think that I can see the present because it enters all my senses. The present must contain lots of information, because there is much to speak of. The past is weird. Except for my consciousness of *now*, things that exist in the present were created in the past. The closer you draw *now* to you, the more you see that things were created in the past. Some things look new, some look old and worn, and some are downright decayed and decrepit. The condition of a thing seems to depend on how long it has been languishing *in the present!* But that is what we mean

by the past, no? At any rate, not every thing that ever was is still around, so there is less to talk about the farther back you go. Decay steals information and makes entropy. Entropy is high in the past, but not maximum until you get to wherever everything in space and time came from. But that is the other strange thing about the past. You can see it. The sun we see lived more than eight minutes ago. We do not really know it still lives now, the relativistically translated now, the sun's *now*.

R.G. Collingwood captured this phenomenological linkage of past and present in *The Idea of History* when he wrote that “the historical present includes in itself its own past ... the past out of which it has grown.”¹ Every thing we know about past things is a thing that still exists in the present. *That is a pretty small sample.*

When I write haiku about the sun, I start a discourse *on* the sun itself. My haiku is an artistic act. When you read it and think it is beautiful, that is an aesthetic act. This is art and aesthetics in the most general sense. The haiku might have been a navigational fix or a radio observation of sunspots; your appreciation might have been for its accuracy or its detail. If I discuss how the haiku was composed, what ink I used on what paper, how the fix was taken, or the steps by which the radio array brought to bear, I start a meta-discourse *about* the sun, and the rest.

In my discourse on historiography, I take the level of meta-discourse to be the realm of philosophy, and the level of discourse to be the realm of history. My view is based on my belief in the power of Croce's language-picture of the interplay between philosophy and history, between meta-discourse and discourse. Collingwood showed how Croce “brings [history and philosophy] together”: “a judgment where subject is individual [history] while its predicate is universal [philosophy].”² On the whole, there

seems to be more of the method of science in the latter, and more of the magic of art in the former.

The “linguistic turn” of the late twentieth century did the philosophy of history a very great service. It rendered epistemology independent of ontology. If one accepts that language exclusively confers meaning, then the subject is agnostic to the existence of the object. In any narrative, it is the predicate—strictly: the verb—that describes the change of state asserted by the proposition. The discourse of history, and the serious historian who composes it, is therefore free to be tolerant of the meta-discourse of the philosophy of history, and the comical philosopher who befuddles it.

In philosophical meta-discourse, I use words like “proposition” to express how the relation of language establishes meaning. I use words like “theory,” or “narrative,” to refer to the network of language relations that construct collections of meanings, that forms the framework of knowledge. In historical discourse, I use words like “observation” to express how the relation of language establishes meaning. I use words like “description,” or “text,” to refer to the network of language relations that construct collections of meanings, that forms the framework of knowledge. I take some words, like “information” or “interpretation” to share their signification over all discourse.

The focus of the historian can and ought to remain on the creative act of interpretation. The historian’s scientific and literary imagination engages the evidence to create a descriptive text, an artistic process.

The focus of the philosopher of history is the critique of historiography, an aesthetic process. For example, it can be an analysis of the formalized representation of a text, or the assessment of meaning, if any, in historical narrative.

Information Based Complexity

The justification to use the concept of information based complexity in our meta-discourse of historiography is the status of the past as the information source for testimony that exists in the present. As Marc Bloch framed the problem, “There is only more or less reliable testimony.”³ Information based complexity provides our meta-discourse with a formal analytic method to support the search for the best picture of the past we can obtain from historical information in the present. Many historians have adopted concepts of historical evidence that are highly coherent with the basic principles of information based complexity.⁴

Complexity is defined as a measure of the resources required to solve a problem, or describe a phenomenon. Information is defined as what we know about a phenomenon or problem. Information is characterized as partial, contaminated, and priced. The information is partial because it is a finite set of points. The information is contaminated because it contains errors. Errors can be the result of inaccurate measurement, careless approximation, noise, where the detection of the signal is difficult or impossible, and even deliberate falsification. Information is priced because there is a cost associated with its production. Price is defined as the cost of obtaining the information and the cost of combining this information. Cost is driven by contamination, an attribute of the information, and intrinsic uncertainty, an attribute of the mapping relation discussed below. Cost is thus a function of complexity.

Resources are allocated to map the information from its source space into a solution set, which is the solution to the problem or the description of the phenomenon.

The set of sample points to be mapped is finite. This mapping is a relation between the object, a source space of information, and the subject, a domain of the solution set. Information is taken to be adaptive, which means that a given sample point of information may depend on previous sample points, a recognition of the implicit presumption of cause and effect. The epistemological challenge of the mapping relation, in very informal terms, is to assure that the neighborhood of a given point in the domain of the solution set is suitably small relative to the neighborhood of the sample point in the source space. Outside this neighborhood, called the radius of information, the information is intrinsically uncertain. The radius of information can be thought of as a measure of the validity of the mapping. It is important to distinguish this attribute of the mapping relation from contamination of the information itself.

If the mapping relation is historical interpretation, then the sample points of the source space correspond to historical evidence and the solution set to an historical narrative. In his essay, "That Noble Dream," Charles Beard offered a set of propositions about historical knowledge that agree nicely with an intuitive notion of partial information. "The documentation with which the historian must work covers only a part of the events that make up the actuality of history," said Beard. "In very few cases can the historian be reasonably sure that he has assembled all the documents of a given period, region, or segment." As Beard explained, "In most cases [the historian] makes a partial selection or a partial reading of the partial record of the multitudinous events and personalities involved in the actuality with which he is dealing."⁵ Regarding our historiographic attitude toward contamination, Marc Bloch, who showed an affinity for

scientific method, remarked, “Here, all reasoning relies upon an analysis of the mechanics of error.”⁶

A consideration of information based complexity suggests that there is significant instability in our information about the past, our historical evidence. Imprecision in any historical interpretation is highly probable. In proportion to the vastness of Beard’s multitudinous events and personalities that make up the actuality of history, there is not much evidence. Beard’s uncountable set of points in the source space lies outside the radius of information of all historical evidence. In comparison to our expectation of the potential information value within the human domain of historical study, the information value of historical evidence is literally vanishingly small. The development of the Internet promises to alter the proportion of information available and archived henceforth for the very recent past, but this shifts the magnitude of the information problem to cost driven by complexity. Further, it should be clear that the intrinsic uncertainty of the future forces the value of that information relation to zero. My conclusion is that the past is only slightly less unknowable than the future.

Information based complexity in the context of historiography gives us a way to assess the magnitude and dimension of the task of historical research. The possible non-zero value, however minute, yielded by the information relation of historical evidence lends support to the meta-discourse prospect that there can be descriptive meaning in an historical narrative. It tells us that our historical knowledge, such as it is, can be as valid as our historical language will permit.

The idea of information flow captures the fundamental dualism of sensory cognition, reflected in the structure of language. Because our sense of the past is directly

based on waking cognition (dreams belong to the realm of myth), that source appears to generate a potentially infinite continuous stream of impressions. Since historical evidence is framed by language, a symbolic artifact of human activity, amenable to be processed by the mind and media as information, it is discrete. The presence of information is the linguistic predicate that relates object to subject. In the absence of information, there is no language. The probabilistic manifold of impressions delivered by the world to the mind fosters complexity.

In my view, information as a relation of object to subject is *a priori*. Linguistically, the mapping is a predicate. It is the building block of our dual discourse, applicable to each as it constructs linguistic objects that carry meaning. When our meta-discourse treats this relation as language, the meaning of narrative is uncoupled from the ontology of the object. This is why physical evidence distinguishes history from literature: fact or fiction—whatever proof the meta-discourse can offer—is not an internal attribute of the text. Here, we have subsumed the proof in our assumption about the source of the information, i.e., that it lies in the world, and not in the mind of another. I call this attribute of the relation tolerant epistemology.

Our meta-discourse builds a network of these relations to form a narrative. In our discourse, a representation of the world becomes the world. I call this interpretation a vernacular landscape.

The Vernacular Landscape

For me, playing with these building blocks is doing history. My pragmatic metaphor for the field of play is an extension and elaboration of a concept I first encountered in a very

fine American historical narrative of wetland agriculture on the antebellum Georgia coast: the vernacular landscape. My working metaphor for doing history is exploration of a vernacular landscape.

Historian Mart A. Stewart defined the cultural characterization of the relationship of man and nature acting within a complex system as a vernacular landscape. The place and time of a vernacular landscape is “rarely regular and formal...a mixture of formed and unformed.” Human conditions and features of the natural environment vary with the given vernacular landscape. I extend the notion to any human *habitus*.⁷ The “vernacular” narrative of antebellum land and labor is beautifully treated by Stewart in his book, *“What Nature Suffers to Groe”: Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920*. The management of slave labor on a Georgia tidewater rice plantation was a vernacular landscape. Any vernacular landscape exhibits essential operating principles, such as unit of labor per unit of land, or resource depletion based on consumption, that are common to the interaction of humans and their general environment. Some set of internal principles, then, are manifest in every vernacular landscape, and comprise its operating system. The operating system gives rise to processes that enable transformation of the vernacular landscape. The process of change in any vernacular landscape is its mode of transformation. The operating system determines the mode of transformation in the vernacular landscape. In Stewart’s book its mode of transformation is concentration of labor on land. Committed to tidewater rice cultivation on the Georgia coast, the “rice and sea island planters ... continually had to invest human and natural energy in their plantations.” The investment in place created a “fluid palimpsest of uses and perceptions.” Upon this ceaselessly re-fashioned soil, irrigated by the tide, the

concentration of master and slave, staple crops and disease, formed an operating system the people of that vernacular landscape called a “hydraulic machine.”⁸

A network of language relations forms the vernacular landscape. It is a line, a plane, or a space as required. As Marc Bloch observed, “Landscape as a unity exists only in my consciousness.”⁹ Bloch’s unity underlies Croce’s judgment of the universal and the individual. The logic of the world is conserved in its representation. The categories of relations, scientific, economic, social, political, literary, military, etc., can be imagined as interpenetrating, interstitial layers of this landscape. The categories can be separated analytically, regarded as independent orthogonal vectors, or combined synthetically, forming multidimensional decision spaces, to suit the purpose of the interpretation. The features of the landscape, objects and the facets of objects, are spatially and temporally bounded by the parameters of information based complexity; their ontology open to the debate of our meta-discourse, their epistemology is semiotic and semantic. Notions of scientific discipline, artistic imagination, and aesthetic judgment guide the explorer. The vernacular landscape supplies the cultural and natural basis for historical interpretation. Metaphorically, then, an historical interpretation can be thought of as an exploration of a vernacular landscape, an explorer’s journal. The description of that exploration thus becomes an historiographical narrative, a mapmaker’s map. Discourse and meta-discourse thus engender transformations on the vernacular landscape.

The vernacular landscape lives at both the philosophical and historical level of discourse. As an entity of human fabrication it is a self-conscious landscape of landscapes. It is a complex adaptive system where the interactions of information and entropy transform the contours of its dynamic knowledge network.

Transformations on a vernacular landscape exhibit the smoothness assumption Collingwood called “historical thinking.”¹⁰ If they do not, the vernacular landscape is science fiction rather than history. This assumption operates on the scale of living memory, as in Collingwood’s example of Caesar getting around, but also on the scale of the distant past and the full-blown topography of any imaginable vernacular landscape composed of historiographic relations. It is what we mean when we say something really happened: we believe a relation exists, in the present, between our living now and an historical description of “then.” It is how the discrete points of historical evidence are connected to the continuous perception of the past.

We do not—and cannot—see the whole vernacular landscape at once, subject as it is to Beard’s selection criteria, but we believe it is there because we—the denizens of culture—build it. Our knowledge claims fill and frame it. What we do see is sometimes in shadows, or broken into bits, with many facets. It is logically fuzzy. Our “historical thinking” guides us to treat the landscape, however changing with each transformation, as continuous in time and space. There is more landscape beyond the horizon.

The Living Past

The path to the horizon starts here, in the present, the living *now*. I believe the best—*most probable? most persuasive? most beautiful?*—historical interpretations contain the most living memory. This is why diaries, journalism, paintings and photographs, studies from ethnography and anthropology and structures from architecture and archaeology are such fertile ground for historical evidence, albeit utterly vulnerable to the profound jeopardy of information based complexity. The critical importance of the primary source

is that it represents the only moment when the object and subject are even possibly spatiotemporally synchronous. The witness is the first link, length < radius of information, in the network of information relations.

The smoothness assumption we have made for the vernacular landscape eventually delivers that critical moment to us. “The historian is not an observer of the past that lies beyond his own time,” affirmed Beard. “The historian must ‘see’ the actuality of history through the medium of documentation.”¹¹ The documentation now resides in the living memory of the historian. Whatever the past was, this living bit of it, partial, contaminated, and priced, is here and now, because language carries meaning. Perhaps this is as close as I can get to what Collingwood meant by “re-enactment.”¹²

Anthropology is a good model for the creation, and investigation, of primary source records.¹³ It is relatively reliable, somewhat rigorous, and rather well documented. The pragmatic and localized methodology expounded by one of anthropology’s leading lights of the twentieth century, Clifford Geertz, is coherent with the view of historiographical discourse I have suggested here. As an eyewitness Geertz created a primary source record for an aspect of Balinese culture, and then, as a meta-witness, analyzed his own interpretive narrative. Geertz showed that the “aura of enlarged importance” surrounding the Balinese cockfight is the high ground it occupies on its own vernacular landscape, where

it provides a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings ... and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment. Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience; a story they tell about themselves.

In order to be “saying something of something,” Geertz touched upon our discussion of dual discourse “to engage in a bit of metaphorical refocusing.” The “analysis of cultural forms,” Geertz argued, shifts from “an endeavor in general parallel to ... deciphering a code, or ordering a system ... to one in general parallel with penetrating a literary text.”¹⁴

One category of cultural text is historical evidence. Geertz provided a cogent definition of our vernacular landscape when he said, “the culture of a people is an ensemble of texts.” For Geertz, in the living present, “societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations.” His advice to the explorer was simple. “One has only to learn how to gain access to them.”¹⁵

Marc Bloch wrote that “the ... progress of our studies is founded upon the ... opposition between generations of scholars.”¹⁶ What effect does the passing from one present to another have on historical evidence? Beard was not sanguine about the hope that the broad scope of longer duration might reveal larger forces or cyclical tendencies, rather than more contamination and cost. “Whatever acts of purification the historian may perform, “ he mused, “he yet remains human, a creature of time, place, circumstance, interests, predilections, culture.”¹⁷ The whole collection of evidence that exists in the present, like everything in the present passing into the past, decays with age. It is subject to the compounding flux of uncertainties of information based complexity. Evidence becomes less reliable, not more so. Compare, for example, the historical status of the Trojan War and the Peloponnesian War. Do we do not see a purer picture of the past, or only more of our own construction of culture?

Let us consider two interpreters and their respective interpretations of the same prominent peak, separated by a generation, on the American vernacular landscape. The

first is Charles Beard; his passage is taken from his 1933 edition *The Rise of American Civilization*. We have seen a sample of Beard's view of historiography above. At that time, within the progressive intellectual community "Beard was *the* American historian." The second is Samuel Eliot Morison; his passage is taken from his 1965 *The Oxford History of the American People*. The "militant cold warrior" Morison was an outspoken opponent of the interwar relativists and a thoroughgoing Rankean.¹⁸ Although I expect our critique to discover cultural evidence of incongruent transformations on the respective vernacular landscapes of the resulting narratives, the structural similarity of the respective texts is so striking that I present them side by side, in Table 1. For visual orientation along the time axis, ranging from 1829 to 1970, Figure 1 exhibits two images that represent the same information, sampled at two points, as our narrative examples.

The narratives share two symbols in their first impression, Andrew Jackson as the man on horseback, entering the White House, center of national power. Another shared symbol follows, a surge, the rising political tide, but with more nuance. In Beard it is a "surging sea of worshippers," in Morison, a hodgepodge of wheels, hooves, and feet arrive to "surge into the White House." By now, both descriptions have broadened to include another character as Morison records the solemn presence of Chief Justice Marshall and Beard puts Webster at the White House door, but there is a divergence of tone. In Beard, "the doors were thrown open to everybody." In Morison, "no police arrangements had been made" to prevent the crowd's entrance. Quickly, both narratives focus on the unruly and the destructive nature of the throng, "muddy boots" intersecting on "damask chairs." Here Beard remarkably refers to Jackson as "the people's Napoleon." Morison has already sent "the President" out a rear window to "take refuge

at Gadsby's." Beard brings in Supreme Court Justice Storey to witness in dismay that "King Mob seemed triumphant." Focusing on witnesses, "the refinements of Jefferson" are recalled as Beard identifies by name and reports an observation of "a leader of the local social set." The lady is reminded of descriptions she has read of the French Revolution. No doubt using the same source, Morison has gone the other way, shifting the sweep of the event's impact to his own political class, "Conservatives" in fear of "another French Revolution." Morison mentions the "Jesus wept" Unitarian sermon, an incident Beard was almost certainly aware of but did not include. Neither Beard nor Morison provided a bibliography or footnotes; from a third fully footnoted narrative, we know that at least one more primary source exists, uncited by either historian.¹⁹

If we try to decipher these texts to say that something happened, we can trace certain features which demonstrate our smoothness assumption at the scale of decades, if not centuries, between the facets of this familiar peak on the American vernacular landscape. Persistent iconic characteristics appear in the historical evidence. As a meta-interpreter, I take these characteristics to be strong indications of relatively uncontaminated if clearly partial information. The synthetic meaning I assign to my aesthetic evaluation of these interpretations is that Jackson rode his horse from the oath of office to the White House, followed closely by a rambunctious crowd. Some of the crowd got into the White House, where glassware was probably broken and at least a few muddy boots found their way into damask chairs. Both historians, from far ends of the American sociopolitical spectrum, seem equally fascinated by these things. The discriminating factor appears to be their attitude toward the French Revolution and its meaning. In Beard's vernacular landscape, the French Revolution, through Mrs. Smith's

words, conjures up the excitement and glory of revolutionary acts of liberation which found an echo in the inauguration of the “people’s Napoleon.” In Morison’s vernacular landscape, the French Revolution is symptomatic of disorder in Heaven and on Earth, so distressing that “Jesus wept.” Each historian, in the present moment of his own artistic effort, composed his text from a narrative he created, as I just did, as he explored his vernacular landscape, a living past in his time and space.

Like Collingwood, I believe the best interpretation any historian can strive to achieve is “a coherent whole of ideas.”²⁰

Why do history?

To seek meaning and tell stories of the quest.

Just as north, south, east and west have transformational meaning only if the vast landscape is something more, the boundless surface of a globe, so science and art, past and present, have meaning only if the vast vernacular landscape is something more, the limitless story of the human world.

Pete Ahrens 03-15-2009

The Rise of American Civilization, 554:

After taking the oath of office, he rode in his best military style down the Avenue to the White House, followed by a surging sea of worshippers.

On his arrival at the presidential residence the doors were thrown open to everybody and, if Webster is to be accepted as authority, the pushing idolators behaved like hoodlums, upsetting the punch bowls, breaking glasses, and standing in muddy boots on damask chairs to catch a glimpse of the people's Napoleon. "The reign of King Mob seemed triumphant," groaned Justice Story of the Supreme Court. Recalling the refinements of Jefferson, Mrs. Margaret Bayard Smith, a leader of the local social set, held her nose and wrote: "The noisy and disorderly rabble ... brought to my mind descriptions I have read of the mobs in the Tuileries and at Versailles."²¹

Beard, 1933

The Oxford History of the American People, 425:

After taking the oath of office, administered by Chief Justice Marshall, and delivering his inaugural address, he mounted his saddle horse and rode to the White House. An informal and unplanned inaugural parade, people in carriages, wagons, and carts, mounted and on foot, followed the President up Pennsylvania Avenue, parked their horses in Lafayette Square, and surged into the White House almost on his coattails. No police arrangements had been made, and the press of well wishers forced the President to escape and take refuge in Gadsby's. Glasses were broken and trodden under foot, punch was spilled, and damask chairs soiled by muddy boots. Conservatives shuddered over what they feared to be the opening scene of another French Revolution; the pastor of the Unitarian church preached a sermon on Luke xix.41, Jesus "beheld the city and wept over it."²²

Morison, 1965

Table 1.



"President's Levee, or all Creation going to the White House,"
Robert Cruikshank, 1789-1856. *Source: www.constitutioncenter.org.*



"President Andrew Jackson During his Inauguration at the White House,"
Louis S. Glanzman, 1970. *Source: www.whitehousehistory.org.*

Figure 1.

¹ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005; reprint), 229-230.

² Collingwood, 196.

³ Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 101.

⁴ J.F. Traub and A.G. Werschulz, *Complexity and Information*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3-23.

⁵ Charles Beard, "That Noble Dream," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Oct., 1935), 74-87.

⁶ Bloch, 119.

⁷ For a discussion of Bourdieu's concept, see Simon Gunn, *History and Cultural Theory* (Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited, 2006), 76-77.

⁸ Pete Ahrens, "The Nature Machine: American Vernacular Landscapes," March, 2008, www.nexialquest.com, 1. Mart A. Stewart, "What Nature Suffers to Groe": *Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 50, 185, xiii. Stewart attributes the concept of the vernacular landscape to John Brinckerhoff Jackson.

⁹ Bloch, 150.

¹⁰ Collingwood, 241.

¹¹ Beard, "That Noble Dream."

¹² Collingwood, 282, "the historian must re-enact the past in his own mind."

¹³ Its quasi-amateur cousin, ethnography, contains some of the best sources American history has for the Indian War Era. For example, the work of John Bourke.

¹⁴ Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," *Daedalus*, Vol. 101, No. 1, Myth Symbol, and Culture (Winter, 1972), 1-37, 26.

¹⁵ Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," 29.

¹⁶ Bloch, 4, note.

¹⁷ Beard, "That Noble Dream."

¹⁸ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 240, 317-318.

¹⁹ Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 340. n.131,1002. Morison is referenced by Johnson in a footnote to his account of the episode. Johnson cites Guillard Hunt (ed.), *Margaret B. Smith, the First Forty Years of Washington Society* for the first quote; and *Life and Letters of Joseph Storey* (Boston 1851), and James Hamilton to Martin Van Buren, March 5, 1829.

²⁰ Collingwood, 229.

²¹ Charles A. Beard, Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1933), 554.

²² Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 425.