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Sources of History: Myth and Image

Nancy K. Levene

In the contemporary human sciences in general, and the study of religion in particular, history is a discourse of immense power and reach. But its role is paradoxical, for although it is charged with dissolving the uniqueness or transcendence of any given point of view, its own supremacy is often taken for granted, even in the post-Foucauldian world where it is common to attack the objectivist aspirations of historicist discourse. What I call for is not simply a more self-conscious concept of history but an investigation of what one might call, following Wallace Stevens, “the substance of [its] region”: the history and scope of history itself as one particular way of being in, and seeing, the world. This is decidedly not to concede that there is something that escapes history but rather to pay closer attention to the myth that there is something that does, and to the ways in which this myth—far from being a mistake—is crucial to conceiving of the borders of history even insofar as everything comes (as everything does) under its critical gaze.

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A mythology reflects its region. Here
 In Connecticut, we never lived in a time
 When mythology was possible—But if we had—
 That raises the question of the image's truth.
 The image must be of the nature of its creator.
 It is the nature of its creator increased,
 Heightened. It is he, anew, in a freshened youth
 And it is he in the substance of his region
 Wood of his forests and stone out of his fields
 Or from under his mountains.

(Wallace Stevens 1997a)

IN 1942, WALLACE STEVENS WROTE the following brief epistle to his friend and fellow poet William Carlos Williams.

Dear Bill:

Thanks for your postcard. I am just getting under way. Twenty or thirty years from now I expect to be really well oiled. Don't worry about my gray hair. Whenever I ring for a stenographer she comes in with a pistol strapped around her belt.

Best regards young feller and best wishes (1997g: 945).

Stevens would die just thirteen years later, significantly sooner than his optimistic projection to Williams. But, at sixty-three when he wrote this letter, he was indeed “getting under way,” producing in the time left to him some of his most powerful and complex poems. The untitled “A mythology reflects its region” (reproduced above) was one of the last poems Stevens wrote, three months before he died in August of 1955, in Hartford, Connecticut. Until the end, Stevens was, as he suggests to Williams (hardly a “young feller” at age fifty-nine when this letter was written), a supremely well-armed poet. To be sure, the letter's arresting penultimate line admits of multiple interpretations. From one angle, the stenographer could be wielding the pistol as Stevens' emissary to fend off encroaching age. “Don't worry,” Stevens might be reassuring Williams (and surely himself), “my poetry is death-defying.” It could also evoke just the opposite, that the pistol is required not to face down death but to protect Stevens from fear or loss of nerve: the stenographer, perhaps, as spiritual body guard. Or still again—the most plausible register—it might convey that, gray hair notwithstanding, the abundance of Stevens' creative energy is such that the stenographer feels herself in imminent danger of a libidinal excess erupting beyond the discipline of the page; that, indeed, Stevens is rather too “well oiled” as it is, a

fact whose good news for the poetry seems rather equivocal news for the stenographer.

Whatever Stevens meant by it, I want to borrow the figure of his stenographer to reflect on issues surrounding the concept and the sources of history, specifically in the study of religion, to which audience I address in this special issue, but also more generally in what is sometimes these days called the human sciences.¹ I think the stenographer's intuition is a rather good one, namely that in confronting the task of transcribing what is said by the poets, one would do well to bring a pistol (though in 2006 one might tuck the pistol into a garter, as Angelina Jolie does in the movie "Mr and Mrs Smith"). That is to say that the project of transcription, for which task one might be assumed to need no more skill than good ears and decent penmanship, also involves relationship and, hence, some degree of attentive negotiation. It could be countered, to be sure, that transcription as a scholarly practice fails to rise even to the complexity of description, much less translation, interpretation, or explanation, four hotly contested terms in the contemporary study of religion which anchor debates concerning the aims, the methods, and the very object at issue.² Transcription has no aim but simple verity; no method but sketching lines on a page that correspond to what was heard; no object but the simple words of another. In these respects, transcription resembles nothing so much as mythology, at least in Stevens' parlance, as that which "reflects its region," or as he says in "Of Modern Poetry": "it repeated what/Was in the script" (1997d: 218).

Indeed, this comparison between stenography and mythology is suggestive of the pronouncement that I want to scrutinize in Stevens' late poem, namely that "Here in Connecticut, we never lived in a time/When mythology was possible." Stevens' bravado to Williams serves as a useful connection to this later poem and its curious declaration because, however offhand, it evokes the same concern with "reflection," "region," and "creation." Here in Connecticut, he seems to say to Williams, what is "in the script" is too volatile for mere transcription, too electric for simple reflection. Transcription, to cross letter and poem, conveys "the nature of

¹ For an account of the work this term does in the contemporary study of religion, see Russell T. McCutcheon's "Definitions" on the Web site of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama, <http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/studyingreligion.html>.

² On description, interpretation, and explanation in the study of religion, see Braun and McCutcheon (2000) (the terms description and explanation, along with location, serve to structure the book's essays while interpretation is a single essay by Hans Penner within description). For a more philosophical account of these terms, see the essays in Frankenberg (2002). On translation, see Williams (2004). On new ways of utilizing these terms, see Smith (2004c).

its creator increased” in ways that are charged for both Stevens, the dangerous composer on fire, and his stenographer, the fortified witness, acting as his not entirely compliant “region”—his connection both to himself and to the world beyond him. What the letter to Williams constructs, then, beyond the evident pleasure Stevens takes in his erotic potency, is a relationship, however asymmetrical, that threatens to exceed the page at least partly because what is *on* the page involves (at least) two—not just two people but the obscurities, the seeming, of the shared world. The poetry, and so why not the very composition, attests that “real and unreal are two in one” (1997b: 414); that “the eye’s plain version is a thing apart,/The vulgate of experience” (1997b: 397). Transcription is charged from one to another because it is charged (both vulgar and vulgate, both primitive and translated) within perception itself, which sees life “as it is, in the intricate evasions of as” (1997b: 415). Thus, “the poem of the act of the mind,” Stevens writes, “has to construct a new stage”; it has to “find what will suffice,” a region of its own, one might say, “an invisible audience” to speak “In the delicatest ear of the mind . . . that which it wants to hear” (1997d: 218–219). And if on this account one might well ask what benefit the stenographer is to get from such a construction (what will suffice, indeed, for her?), one could respond, once more in Stevens’ dense language, that “the evilly compounded, vital I” conjured so vividly in this poetry is no innocent—neither “clear” nor “white” nor “brilliant-edged.” In this world, this climate, in the “bitterness” of the “imperfect that is our paradise,” it is not entirely the worst thing, in a war of words, to be the one with the pistol (1997e: 179).

I begin with Stevens to speak to the question of how (and why) to conceive of the sources of history, the sources, namely, of the possibility of doing history. In the context of contemporary debates in the study of religion concerning history and the historical imperative (“always historicize!”), it might very well be productive to follow out the *typos* of Stevens’ stenographer as guerilla scholar, properly armed against the poetic effusions of her subject and ready to commit ideas to the matter of pen and ink without the stain of sentiment, the confusion of empathy, or the illusion of accuracy (repetition, reflection).³ But I want to turn the stenographer in another direction, to the fictional reading of her given shape by “a mythology,” whereby her very labor is imagined as, in

³ “Always historicize!” is the “slogan” with which Jameson opens *The Political Unconscious* (1981: 9). In deploying it here, I am using it in a way Jameson himself did not. While Jameson means to question what it is “always” to “historicize” (precisely the object of my essay here), in the study of religion, it often stands as a *substitute* for this kind of question.

some sense, impossible (without recourse to self-defense). What interests me is not only what Stevens says in this poem about the “image’s truth” in the “substance of [its] region”—about the history and geography of ideas—but the distinction, the border, with which the poem begins: between Connecticut and some unnamed place or time; between myth and image; between reflection and substance.⁴ It is this distinction, with its suggestion that history is bound up with the invention of (the history of) history, which anchors the poem as a comment on both history and its sources: on the sources of history, the history of sources. It is this distinction—the question of how to read it—that strikes me as a salutary intervention in the contemporary study of religion and its related disciplines and discourses.

The mantle of historian in the broadest sense is one that few scholars in the human sciences would disavow. More strongly, it is fair to say that we live in a historical period when history is invested with monumental importance as precisely that discourse which is to function as a solvent for the temptation to make oneself and one’s own monumental—the temptation to make oneself, as Vico puts it, “the measure of all things” (1948: 60). To deploy this critique productively, the discipline has had to give up its own pretense to measure all things, or, as the historian of gender Joan Wallach Scott observes, “to claim neutral mastery or to present any particular story as if it were complete, universal, and objectively determined” (1999: 7). The discourse of history can thus now be seen “not exclusively as a record of changes” but “also crucially as a participant in the production of knowledge,” a participant that consequently has had to become relentlessly self-conscious (i.e., theoretical) about “the assumptions, practices, and rhetoric of the discipline” (Scott 1999: 2).

As Scott’s language makes clear, history, at least in some quarters, has absorbed the hermeneutical picture of things bequeathed by post-structuralism, according to which, in Scott’s reading, “meanings are not fixed in a culture’s lexicon but are rather dynamic, always potentially in flux”:

Their study therefore calls for attention to the conflictual processes that establish meanings, to the ways in which such concepts as gender acquire the appearance of fixity, to the challenges posed for normative social definitions, to the ways these challenges are met—in other words, to the play of force involved in any society’s construction and implementation of meanings: to politics (1999: 5).

⁴ For a superb reading of these themes in Stevens, see Polka (2002).

It is not that Scott's post-structuralist-informed concept of the project of history is universally accepted. Indeed, for the last several decades or so, the discipline of history has been experiencing a renaissance of theoretical energy, with all kinds of lively disagreements about the nature of objectivity, the methods of research, and the subjects of analysis.⁵ But Scott's comments are nevertheless indicative of a paradox in the contemporary practice of history that extends well beyond the discipline itself, to wit, that the consciousness that history can no longer identify meaning but only the "conflictual processes that establish meanings" has had the effect of strengthening the authority and enlarging the scope of history as a discourse. Regardless of where one comes down on the claims of post-structuralism more narrowly, history now widely stands for the very recognition that the meanings of a given sociocultural artifact, event, or utterance are inseparable from (sometimes even identical with) the immediate (in space and time) politico-geographical environment in which they appear and that therefore the labor of the historian (qua "genealogist") is even more necessary, even more urgent than before.

No theorist is more responsible for the construction of this urgency than Michel Foucault (1984), whose writings on the culture and politics of history have proved impossible to ignore. For Foucault, it is most basically a question of distinguishing between a history in support of metaphysics and a history in support of liberation:

The historian's history finds its support outside of time and pretends to base its judgments on an apocalyptic objectivity. This is only possible, however, because of its belief in eternal truth, the immortality of the soul, and the nature of consciousness as identical to itself . . . On the other hand, the historical sense can evade metaphysics and become a privileged instrument of genealogy if it refuses the certainty of absolutes. Given this, it corresponds to the acuity of a glance that distinguishes, separates, and disperses; that is capable of liberating divergence and marginal elements—the kind of dissociating view that is capable of decomposing itself, capable of shattering the unity of man's being through which it was thought he could extend his sovereignty to the events of his past (1984: 87).

From Foucault's perspective, refusing the certainty of absolutes is not only a recommended operating procedure in delving into the thickets of time. It is an imperative, one that liberates not only "divergence and

⁵ A good overview of these debates is Fay, Pomper, and Vann (1998). See also Pallares-Burke (2002).

marginal elements” that have escaped the “apocalyptic” gaze of “the historian’s history” but also and primarily history itself, whose autodecomposition is to coincide with the decomposition of its subjects, “man” and “his past.” As Foucault’s distinction seems to proclaim, there are no other live options in the engagement with history and the historical. For to abjure the “dissociating view” that finds support only in its own demise is in some fundamental sense to fail the historical as such—it is to withhold something from history that inextricably belongs to it.

This picture has been quite influential in recent theories in the history of religions, many of which begin with some kind of gesture proscribing discourses which seem to exempt themselves from history. Although anxious thereby to align itself with other disciplines in the human sciences, the study of religion is sometimes seen to face magnified challenges in this regard, challenges that underscore the principles of history as they are articulated by Foucault and Scott. Whereas in the study of literature, for example, the historicists are apt (though less and less, these days) to encounter resistance from those who claim certain texts transcend “the play of force” by virtue of their power to connect with a human spirit across time, the study of religion is confronted by that spirit of spirits, that transcendent of transcendents—God, or some other divine entity.⁶ The fact that the very locution “history of religions” was initially deployed by scholars who were deeply sympathetic not only to divine entities but also to what in today’s terms would be cast as the unhistorical (i.e., theological) notions of continuity and patterns across time and space is an irony not lost on the most recent generation of theorists, who have worked assiduously to liberate the phrase from its murky past.⁷ As Bruce Lincoln declares, in his “Theses on Method,” a manifesto for the twenty-first century version of the field,

History of religions is . . . a discourse that resists and reverses the orientation of that discourse with which it concerns itself. To practice history of religions in a fashion consistent with the discipline’s claim of title is to insist on discussing the temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human, and material dimensions of those discourses, practices, and

⁶ To judge from the Web site of the North American Association for the Study of Religion—an organization whose members have been disproportionately active in the production of theory in the field—the confusion of the study of religion with the practice of religion remains a major problem for its “scholarly/scientific” study. See <http://www.as.ua.edu/naasr/about.html>.

⁷ On the history of the history of religions, see Kippenberg and, more concisely, Smith (2004c). Smith’s work on the theory of comparison has fruitfully sought to tilt history not only toward the perception of “incongruity” in the human imagination (1993a: 293–294) but also toward the creative frisson of ignoring standard notions of temporal and spatial congruity.

institutions that characteristically represent themselves as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, and divine (1999b: 395).⁸

If Scott's move is to subject what was formerly seen as stable or fixed to the dissolving powers of history, this becomes, in Lincoln's hands, the pistol that fires the fatal shot into the breast of a theology that seeks to overstep its place within a confessional tradition.⁹ The study of religion will have come of age in the human sciences when it realizes not only, with J. Z. Smith, that "nothing human is foreign to me" (1982: 104) but that the "foreign" and its "apocalyptic" acolytes (whether objectivist/historical or subjectivist/theological) are still, and always, at the gates. History, then, is the "glance that distinguishes, separates, and disperses;" history is a weapon that "resists and reverses."¹⁰

Consistent with Foucault, Lincoln is careful to underscore that, while the historian must wield a kind of critical power vis a vis the insider discourse of religion, "this power ought to probe scholarly discourse and practice as much as any other" (1999b: 397). History is a weapon that, in pointing at "them," points at itself.¹¹ Like Scott, the recognition that it is the purpose of history to understand "the ideological products and operations" of society (one's own and that of others) leads Lincoln to the effort to be self-conscious about the ideological products and operations of the very discourse of history. In Scott's case, this recognition amounts to the attempt to practice history without entirely believing in it—to complicate conceptions of the lucidity of evidence (archival and otherwise) and to be suspicious of identifying what "happened to women and men" instead of "how the subjective and collective meanings of women and men as categories of identity have been constructed," including how

⁸ Modeled informally, one assumes, on Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach," Lincoln's essay recalls its predecessor in its depiction of "the 'religious sentiment' " as "a social product" (Marx 1978b: 145). But Lincoln's notion that history is "method" significantly underplays Marx's concomitant view that history is also the "object," the very product of the conditions it documents (1978a: 155–156). In a forum on Lincoln's work in the journal *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, Jay Geller ventures that Lincoln's "Theses" are not "on method" at all but are rather intended "to inculcate an attitude" of critique in the field (2005: 19). Lincoln, in his response, concurs (2005: 62), but he does not address Geller's specific complaint that "method, methods, methodology" are "too often employed as nondialectical cookie cutters with delusions of grandeur imposed upon the data (as if the data preexisted the incision)" (Geller 2005: 19).

⁹ Smith recasts the debate from one of theologians versus historians to one based on issues of "language and experience," i.e., "whether experience can ever be immediate or is always mediated," a question which he says cuts across the earlier, "essentially political, division" (2004c: 366). Although Smith's new division might by some accounts throw together unlikely bedfellows, it essentially re-describes what was always at issue for the historians in their conception of the claims of theology (i.e., immediate experience).

¹⁰ For some recent theorists of similar inclination, it is science that is to play this role of reversal and resistance (Boyer 2001; Jensen and Martin 2003; Lawson and Macauley 1990; Wiebe 1999).

¹¹ This point is also made forcefully by McCutcheon (2004).

they are being constructed by the historian herself. In short, the task is to “acknowledge and take responsibility for the exclusions involved in one’s own project” (1999: 7). The authority of history, Lincoln concurs, is “stak[ed]” on “rigorous critical practice” which practice is to turn back on itself, one imagines, at regular intervals (1999b: 395). Thus, the historian is charged with new powers to “probe beneath the surface” while at the same time being (or becoming) conscious that she has less power to see what is (and is not) there (1999b: 397). Given, then, the “temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human, and material” interests of the historian herself, one might say that she is superior to her object of analysis (rigorous in her critical practice) only in prescinding from describing her own task in “eternal, transcendent, spiritual, or divine” terms.

But if history is going to be responsible for both itself and its object—if indeed these projects are to be seen as inseparable—then one needs a more self-conscious, more dialectical concept of history than that which is deployed by Foucault (1984), with its neo-Heraclitan critique of the recurring Parmenidean opponent.¹² Having become conscious that history is the critique, not the simple documentation, of things eternal, transcendent, spiritual, or divine at least partly because history itself is not, as Foucault said, “outside of time” (history itself is not simple), we need to become conscious, too, of the ways in which, in disavowing any sovereign access to “the events of his past,” the historian is also, thereby, transcribing this past on a “new stage,” before “an invisible audience;” he is “finding what will suffice” with no “script” (Stevens 1997d: 218–219).¹³ The history of history, like the history of something like gender or

¹² As Hans Kippenberg observes, two recent “handbooks” for the study of religion (Braun and McCutcheon 2000; Taylor 1998) which identify major terms and rubrics in the field leave out the category of “history,” which category Kippenberg “aims at reintroducing . . . into religious studies” (2002: xii). Kippenberg’s book, while largely a survey of major figures in the history of religions, 1850–1920, goes some way toward at least raising the question of why debates over history, which raged in the early twentieth century of Weber, Troeltsch, and Simmel, have so receded of late. In a forum on Kippenberg’s book in JAAR, Kocku von Stuckrad advances a concept of history beyond either the (Parmenidean) “horn of essentialism,” according to which “History (capital H)” is deployed to “make transcendent truths visible in profane contexts” (2003: 907) and the (Heraclitan) “horn of contingency,” according to which history is abandoned “as an analytical instrument” (2003: 908). However, his conclusion that history “should not be mixed up with the ‘facts’ themselves—which would lead to essentialism—but, rather, should be regarded as a reminder that there are facts ‘out there’ that influence our positions or even determine our concepts” (2003: 911), is obscured by the use of quotation marks here. If facts are “out there” and not out there, how does the position differ from essentialism, in which there are “facts” but not facts?

¹³ As Marx puts it, more prosaically, in his “Theses,” “The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that it is essential to educate the educator himself” (144).

religion, is not only about dissolution and dispersal; it is also, simultaneously, about construction. This is to become conscious that between the material and the spiritual, the temporal and the transcendent, is a concept of history that can account for both the instability and the power of a standpoint that, one could say, negates its negation. As Terry Eagleton puts it,

History is what happens to an animal so constituted as to be able, within limits, to determine its own determinations . . . It is because our entry into the symbolic order—language and all it brings in its wake—puts some free play between ourselves and our determinants that we are those internally dislocated, non-self-identical creatures known as historical beings. (2000: 97).

On the one hand, Eagleton knows what Foucault knows by way of the early-modern state-of-nature theorists: that there is nothing (natural) that is not swallowed up by history, including history itself. Our “entry” into the symbolic order, into culture, into history, is but a way of accounting for this order’s very non-identity (here in Connecticut . . . we never lived in another time . . . But if we had . . .). On the other hand, Eagleton is much more articulate—where Foucault is silent—about the sources of history: not what stands outside it (some putative given like nature or the eternal) but what stands within it—the “intrusion of subjectivity,” Žižek puts it, “irreducible to the ‘objective’ historical process” (2003: 134). We do not live by culture alone because culture is already “the ‘supplement’ which plugs a gap at the heart of our nature, and our material needs are then reflected in its terms” (Eagleton 2000: 99). More simply, we never get to (there is no) nature alone, but we get hungry nevertheless, and culture is both a product of this hunger and productive of it. As Marx famously observed, “the first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs [for food, drink, clothing, habitation], the production of material life itself” (1978a: 156). If history, then, is to undo culture (and history itself), it must also align itself with culture (and history itself), with the “animal” that, “within limits, determine[s] its own determinations,” and thus with the source of history in the act that rejects historicism: the act that engages “the absolute Present, in the unconditional urgency of a Now” (Žižek 2000: 135). It must align itself, as it were, with both the plug and with the gap.

Both Scott and Lincoln are strenuous advocates for the increasing self-awareness of their respective fields, and both have written effective histories focused on their fields’ discursive practices. It is not so much that there is something *missing* in their work, but rather that, in taking up their challenge to “probe scholarly discourse and practice as much as any other,” I

am led, in the mode of construction, to ask the question of the history of history—the history of the very idea that “the image’s truth” lies “in the substance of [its] region.” Although Stevens’ language in “a mythology” will inevitably put scholars sympathetic to Lincoln on their guard—the language of “creator,” “image,” “truth,” “substance,” and, not least, “mythology” itself (is not such language the data waiting to be theorized?)—Stevens’ poem is not wholly at odds with Lincoln’s and Scott’s sensibilities. To be sure, in the study of religion more than many other disciplines, we are highly alert to the rhetorical spaces to which Stevens here alludes (but does not merely reflect or transcribe), in which the creation of truth is a privileged act from nowhere (human), whether the truth be a book, a speech, a concept, or a material artifact. But for Stevens, “the image’s truth” is a “question,” not an answer, and the question is, how do we know what a true image is? Given that the “true” is inseparable from its “image” (its “temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human, and material” investments), how do we know not only *that* this is the case but *what* it is we know when we know this? The question, in Stevens, is not only how to account for the region—the regime—of truth but how to account for the truth of region, the truth of a given regime. The question is not only how to account for the history of truth but how to account for the truth of history.

For the Lincoln of the “Theses on Method,” these paired questions are absolutely at odds with one another—indeed, the “Theses” are written precisely to distinguish between “truths,” “truth-claims,” and “regimes of truth” unequivocally to rule out of scholarly bounds any use of (or questions concerning) the word truth without a hyphen or quotation marks (1999b: 398). Yet, the issue at stake here, once again, is not how to locate a truth that stands outside history—indeed it is one of the more frustrating strategies of historicism as it is currently practiced in the study of religion that any question about its grounds (its sources, its gaps) is reflexively identified with all things “eternal” and “transcendent.” Rather, it is to stand, with Stevens, in some region or other, in some creation or other, in some truth or other (say, the truth that history gives us access to the “temporal . . . human and material,” “Heightened” as theory and not simply experience), and ask, was it always, has it always been, is it everywhere so? Is not history historical, too, and if so, when and how did it begin (how did we “enter” into it)? How could one, in history, talk about such a beginning without betraying the very historical self-consciousness that makes this question possible (and how could one avoid such talk)? In becoming stenographer to our own ideas, how could we appear before ourselves without the arms to distinguish between reflection and substance, between identity and difference—without the recognition of the difference (intellectual and political) these distinctions, these differences, make?

For Stevens, the richness of history consists in its being impossible either simply to reflect our region or to be free of it. It consists in its being impossible to determine which is the image and which the truth ["we do not know what is real and what is not" (1997b: 402)] because image and truth come into existence (are "created") together as the very distinction that ensures one can (and will) be confused for the other (that the image is, simply, true; that the truth is merely an image). What Stevens brilliantly expresses is the sense of distance and dissonance that the telling of history both depends upon and also produces: that we can tell the history of our region because we "never lived in a time/When mythology"—as what merely "reflects [transcribes] its region"—"was possible." We can pursue both the corruptions that history sees and the corruptions that it itself brings because the source of history in the very effort to get beyond it (to determine its determinations) is an image not a myth, substantial not reflective: the source of history is the "image's truth" (the truth's image), corrupt and corruptible only because of the difference truth and image, together, inaugurate. As Stevens so suggestively implies, the difference that matters for history (contra myth) is not *between* truth and image, the extra-historical and the historical avatars, versions, and constructions. The difference that matters is between the "image's truth" and reflection, between the undecidability of image and truth and the perfect union of them, which is the perfect illusion or delusion of them.

What then of mythology, what of "a mythology reflects its region"? What are we to make of the claim that, "Here in Connecticut, we never lived in a time/When mythology was possible," or the following subjunctive, "—But if we had— . . ."? It is possible to read these lines in a Lincolnian register—that Stevens' Connecticut is that region where theory shall be relentlessly self-conscious about its own myth-making and will therefore not—in any naïve way—simply reflect the myths it investigates.¹⁴ We need to know what it would be to so reflect ("But if we had . . .") to "raise the question" of doing otherwise (to "reverse and resist"). But Stevens' language is more pointed. He does not say "we do not live in a time" or "we shall not live in a time," but, "we never lived in a time." Mythology, for Stevens, is that time, that region, which history differentiates from itself (as that which is not itself differentiated, which has no gap, which yearns for nothing beyond history and therefore never even gets that far). It is the identification of that time, that region, by the construction of which history conserves to itself the conditions of its own possibility. Like the posture of historicism, this is a move to expel what is

¹⁴ See Lincoln (1999a).

foreign by extending what is familiar as far as the eye can see. We have always lived in a time when mythology was not possible (always historicize!). But unlike historicism, what is expelled is not history's (extra-historical) other but its very image; what is expelled is the very image of history as mere reflection, with which the inauguration of history as the "image's truth" (and thus the image's lie) will always have to grapple. History is more than reflection, more than mythology (it is, for Stevens, a "true image") because it can be, can be taken as, only this.

To suggest, then, as Stevens does, that there has not always been history—that history, like truth, is made not given (history, like truth, is historical not natural)—is to see that history is not just a tool we can indifferently deploy like a hammer on any and every nail. History has its own truth (in Hegel's language, the concept is the content), and it is that history has not always been true, even as "we never lived in a time . . ." without it. When we turn history on itself—when we historicize the historicizer—or when we turn the lens of history not just on discourses that claim to be eternal but, more perilously still, on those that claim to be historical, *what* we see is made possible by the fact that history is other than, or more than, itself. History is the distance, the difference, the dissonance of image and truth; history is self-consciousness with a pistol, for "the plainness of plain things is savagery" (Stevens 1997b: 399); history is the intentional occupation of a region where mere reflection is an impossible possibility ("But if we had . . ."), and thus history in all its guises is historically and conceptually specific: it is "the substance of [its] region" ("here in Connecticut . . .").

Ideally, then, the history of religions would concern itself not only with the data of religion (or "religion") but also with the datum that is the "history of religions." By this I do not mean how this locution came to be used—in Scott's words, "the conflictual processes" that led to this field "acquir[ing] the appearance of fixity"¹⁵—but, again, what are the conditions of its possibility: how is the history of religions possible (in any of its versions) if history itself (like religion) is regional; if history is not a hammer or even a lens but an image of some particular truth, a truth of some particular image? With these questions in mind, it would not be proper to proceed as if "History is the method and Religion the object of study" (Lincoln 1999b: 395) because method and object would refer to the same thing, history itself, which would only serve to magnify the difference at (or that is) its heart. One would have to begin otherwise, with the difference marked out by Stevens between history and mythology,

¹⁵ Tomoko Masuzawa's recent book (2005) is exemplary in this regard, although it deals with the history of "world religions."

the difference between difference and repetition. One would have to make difference the datum of historical scholarship in such a way that, historically speaking, one theorized the ways in which not all differences are alike. One would have to know how to talk about the difference between differences: the difference between, on the one hand, two truths (two images, two regimes) and, on the other hand, between both truths (images, regimes), beyond which history cannot go, and “myth,” which history can only name and expel; the difference, in short, as Stevens puts it, between the “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (1997f: 8).¹⁶

It is important to make explicit, though it should be clear enough, that this is not a comment on “myth” or “mythology” *per se*, which, using different conceptions and different languages, may or may not be historical in the sense I am using this term here. The word mythology in Stevens is simply a place-holder for a certain kind of difference; it is a place-holder for history. History is: not myth, where myth is understood to be the repetition of “what was in the script;” the “past as souvenir” (Stevens 1997d: 218). But this is to say something potentially much more explosive than that myth is or is not historical. It is to say that, if history is not universal except in Stevens’ very specific sense, that is, “we never lived in a time” without history precisely because history “knows” the difference between its own “time” and the time without history, then not everything, not every region, not every human artifact, discourse, tradition, mind is historical, even as everything can be the subject of history.¹⁷ It is to say that to understand history purely as “method” can make no sense of history’s own specificity, its own concept—it can make no sense of the ways in which both the history of the temporal (the human) and the history of history (of this particular scholarly practice) will coincide just as much in expelling (in saying, I can’t see) as they will in “probing beneath the surface” (in saying, here is what I can). Conceiving of history (or theory) as method makes no sense of the history (or theory) *of* method—the method *of* history. For if one acknowledges, with Stevens, that history has

¹⁶ Žižek makes a similar point about language, by reflecting on the title of Benjamin’s essay “On Language in General and Human Language in Particular.” As Žižek puts it, “The point here is not that human language is a species of some universal language ‘as such,’ which also comprises other species (the language of gods and angels? animal language? . . . the language of DNA?): there is no actually existing language other than human language—but, to comprehend this ‘particular’ language, one has to introduce a minimal difference, conceiving it with regard to the gap which separates it from language ‘as such’ (the pure structure of language deprived of the insignia of human finitude . . .)” (2003: 132).

¹⁷ This point is well made by Vico, for whom, on the one hand, “the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and . . . its principles are to be found within the modifications of our own human mind”—that is, the mind *per se* is historical—and on the other hand, this very dialectic of mind and history is inconceivable in either the “poetic” or the “heroic” language of the ancients (1948: 96, 336).

always been thus (for us historians, us poets) not because it has always been in the world but because it has not; if one recognizes that mythology (or transcription) is the nothing that is not there, not the nothing that is; if one sees that the power that inheres in the conception of history as a universal solvent depends precisely on the sharpness of its boundaries and the specificity of its region, then one comes to the place of having to recognize that the history of religions may only ever be the history of religion, the history, in short, of history as the concept and the content of one particular way of being in, and seeing, the world. However broad and inclusive may be that “one,” it is not infinitely, endlessly, indifferently so.

This is, admittedly, to court ridicule or worse. Have we not been here before in the history of religions (in the history of the history of religions)? Was not this very (mythic?) distinction between mythic time and historical time—between, therefore, the archaic and the modern, them and us—by which Eliade and his conceptual forebears traversed the world of religions, just exactly what the new history of religions was designed to kill off once and for all? Was it not exactly—both intellectually and politically—what warranted the size of its weapons? There are several things to say on this score, however briefly and programmatically. For Eliade, the notion that there was content to the concept of history—that history was the substance of its region—was designed to highlight the richness (to correct the historicist impoverishment) of the mythic: for him, the ability of *homo religious* to inhabit his cosmos in a way that was, in Eagleton’s language, self-identical. As the familiar story goes, the position had a pointedly dual rhetorical effect, intending to romanticize the other and ending up privileging the self [enter Said’s (1978) *Orientalism* to correct Orientalism by showing these are identical moves]. This narrative is so familiar to students of religion that it barely bears repeating. The Eliadan schema was repellent (intellectually and politically) and remains the unofficial sign of just about everything one wants to avoid in the contemporary field.¹⁸ The new history has become the intellectual tool that conveniently rids us of the political problem.

But the time may be ripe to correct this correction, going further not back. More specifically, if Foucault’s history enables one to “distinguish, separate,” and, above all, one assumes, “disperse” the piety of self-regard, unity, and uniqueness Eliade’s views so readily prop up, this is because, as we have seen, it is—or claims to be—self-conscious about both the instruments that suppress “divergence and margins” and the instrument that it

¹⁸ J. Z. Smith is a noteworthy exception, whose own sharp differences from Eliade are framed in the context of a careful engagement with the work and its contexts. See Smith (1993b, 2004a, b).

itself is. Foucault and his inheritors, like Scott and Lincoln, are constructive precisely because they explode Eliade's flattened Hegelianism, whereby the idea that history has content is simply an occasion to talk longingly about transcendence and supremacy. But these thinkers, with Foucault, utilize and even call for, without adequately theorizing, the other dimension of this kind of critique, namely the critique of the instrument that critiques, whereby history, too, *must* in fact have limits of its own. We cannot avoid the "glance" of history, one might say, not because everything is historical but because not everything is; because history is the non-self-identity which enables us to see exactly what (the claim to) self-identity can come to. We had to go further than Eliade to see that what we did not like was not the recognition that history has a history but the mythic way in which this signified for him that there was something (other than a construction of history) outside history itself—a claim for which there are no warrants.

In Stevens, by contrast, the distinction between myth and history is historical, not mythic. It is only from the standpoint of the inseparability (as well as dissonance) of image and truth, region and substance, that their mythic identity can be recognized as a time in which "we never lived." Myth in Stevens' sense is thus a creation of history as that which has no region because it merely reflects it, a creation whose very suppression inaugurates its power over us. Myth is pure determination, pure transcription, pure dispersion. This hardly puts religion on the side of the mythic. By whatever definition, religion, like "religion," like every human construction, like every construction of the human, is inextricably historical. What the study of religion is well placed to analyze (reverse and resist), then, is the history of "those discourses, practices, and institutions that characteristically represent themselves as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, or divine"—that represent themselves in mythic terms. But this is equally to see that this "characteristic representation" is a creation of history as much as a rejection of it: that there is indeed *nothing* on the side of the mythic, nothing to probe beneath, nothing to reverse or resist but the image of history itself as it expels its sources, its origin—as it ceaselessly expels, namely, itself (as what it is not).¹⁹ History

¹⁹ I have in mind here Masuzawa's point that, since Hume, the history of religions has proceeded precisely by differentiating itself from its origins, which are conceived to lie outside history (2000: 212–213), so that even as historians have prescinded from (repressed) speculating about what those origins are (2000: 221), they have still factored into the historical (and conceptual) equation. Masuzawa would thus have us begin otherwise, namely, with Foucault, genealogically (223). What I am saying is something different (from Hume), namely that the origins of history are history's creation, not the creation of history, and thus I am recommending something different (from Masuzawa): a concept of history adequate to genealogy and not just sacrificed to it.

gives birth to itself (and if not, then what *is* its cause but myth?) as that which renounces what it also (because it also) creates. Its source is thus neither outside it as a cause nor inside it as a protected kernel: history is its own source, its own image, its own truth. History is the image of the “one truth beyond all question,” as Vico says, namely that it is “made by men,” not by God (96). Again, Stevens: “We seek nothing beyond reality. Within it/Everything . . .” (1997b: 402). Like Smith’s use of the maxim that nothing human shall be foreign, this is to extend the reach of reason to the end of the road; it is to slay the supernatural. But it is also, thereby, to slay the natural, its inevitable counterpart, and with it, the sense that “everything” is now entirely in view [“we do not know what is real and what is not” (Stevens 1997b: 402)]. In Stevens’ world, the supernatural and the natural go down together in “the theory of life,/As it is, in the intricate evasions of as” (1997b: 415). What is left is the desire for the real, to which we keep “coming back and coming back” (1997b: 402); the desire for “the metaphysical streets of the physical town” (1997b: 403).

This is to capture something about history that turns the post-structuralist point on its head. Instead of scaling back history (we cannot document meaning but only the processes that establish them) to enlarge it (everything is equally subject to its “method”), one can enlarge it (we seek “everything”) to scale it back (to the “substance of its region”).²⁰ In enlarging history, in re-conceiving of the historical concept as the content, and thus in enabling one to speak not of meaning qua the eternal but of truth and its image—“the vulgate of experience”—one will thereby have achieved a different kind of scholarly restraint than that modeled by Scott and Lincoln. Instead of forswearing truth or meaning, understood as entities that have no region, one will be forswearing history as a method that has no region: one will be substantiating history in *its* region by tracking its limits as well as its reach. As post-Eliadans, we cannot (intellectually or politically) claim (as he did) that any particular people, any artifact, or any text can be found outside those limits in the reflection of mythology—not Australian Aborigines or Adaman Islanders or Southern European pig farmers, not the Hindus or the South Asians or the Ancients. Indeed, because everything is on the side of history, we are in a position to take Foucault further than he himself went, to decompose not just history but

²⁰ This is to modify Daniel Dubuisson’s charge that “religion” is an “ethnocentric discourse” which “communicates, to those who speak the language and who profess it, the incomparable sensation that *the* world is everywhere *their* world” (2003: 196). It is to say, instead, that the observation that *the* world is taken as (confused for) *their* world is itself regional. Ethnocentrism is not (merely) ethnocentric, that is, it is only possible to confuse (impose) one’s world for (on) the world if one is also capable of differentiating them.

its polar opposite and sworn enemy—the possibility, the belief in the possibility of (again, in Stevens’ sense) myth. We can put our pistols away.

Or at least stash them safely (can this be safe?) in that garter. For this is not to say that, post-Eliade, history (properly decomposed) can once again be reclaimed as solvent, as “method.” It is to say, post-post-Eliade, post-Foucault, if not quite post-Scott, post-Lincoln, that history inevitably differentiates between difference and identity, between description (interpretation, explanation) and transcription, between the stenographer (as history with a pistol) and stenography as repetition of what was in the script. In this account, history no more elongates or ontologizes the difference between one period or region and another than it does collapse them.²¹ The difference that matters to history, in history, is the difference of history itself—that the stenographer cannot (just) practice stenography. In this sense, history is, if not without region, then “without place,” as Stevens might put it: it is born in the recognition that “It is not/ The thing described, nor false facsimile” (1997c: 301). History is the interpretation that does not merely reflect—that substantiates and critiques its region only insofar as it lives therefrom. History is the “description” that “is” (also) “revelation” (1997c: 301).²²

If historians, then, find themselves in a position of having to transcribe a myth (mythologize a transcription), whether of the Ancients or the Adaman Islanders, they may find that there is no stenographer to do so. This is not because transcription—or, as Lincoln calls it, “amanuensis” (1999b: 398)—is to be rejected as a form of advocacy in contrast to history as critique but because what makes history’s critique (the critique of history) possible in the first and last place is the difference (as with image and truth) not *between* advocacy and critique but *between* advocacy and critique, on the one hand, and repetition on the other. To recognize that “we never lived in a time when mythology was possible” is to historicize what has no history—myth as that which reflects rather than embodies (and renounces) its sources—and thus to tell a story of difference: the difference of an identity that cannot be mistaken for (or

²¹ What Foucault lamentably bequeathed us in this vein is the certainty that historical period is ontology—that certain things are products of modernity or products of the middle ages or antiquity. For example, in an essay on the question “Is there a history of sexuality,” David M. Halperin (1998) grounds his claim that “sexuality is indeed . . . a uniquely modern production” in part in “the sheer interval of time separating the ancient from the modern world” (1998: 254). It may indeed be the case that what today is meant by sexuality is modern (whenever that begins), but this can have nothing to do with the passage of time, but only with concepts and conditions (and even then, differences of concept and condition are so often reified according to the logic of time).

²² In this Stevens is suggestively echoed by Grafton (2001), whose essays on the Renaissance are similarly sensitive to—not simply skeptical of—the dissonance of seeming and being.

about) itself. This is not to say that there is no difference between advocacy and critique, but that the very power of critique as an alternative to advocacy comes from what they share—history as the non-self-identity that empowers both, that makes both advocacy and critique forms of critical engagement with the content that is (and limits) history's concept. As Stevens' stenographer well knew, then, the point is to arm oneself not only against poetic effusions (and emissions) but also against the myth that we ever lived in a time when such arms were unnecessary; to arm oneself, then, not (only) against anything that claims to escape history but against anything that claims not to (that claims history has no borders). It is only in myth that history and myth are identical (always historicize!); in (and by virtue of) history, they are absolutely different. The claim that nothing escapes history can thus be said either mythically (as the reflection of history as mere method) or it can be said historically (as the image whose very truth makes it, also, false). There is something, then, that escapes the concept of history, and it is history itself in the myth that it never ends (and thus never begins): that it has no source, even in (as) itself.

We say of the moon, it is haunted by the man
 Of bronze whose mind was made up and who, therefore, died.
 We are not men of bronze and we are not dead.
 His spirit is imprisoned in constant change.
 But ours is not imprisoned. It resides
 In a permanence composed of impermanence,
 In a faithfulness as against the lunar light . . . (Stevens 1997b: 403).

Theory and method in the study of religion—in the history of religions—has kept its eye steadfastly on what it sees as its other (and the other that is itself). It must now try to account for—and not just attempt to transcribe—what, and how, it has seen.

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