

## Historical Distance and Questions of Form in 5½ Points

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Résumé de l'article

Le présent article aborde la forme, ou ce que Phillips appelle la fabrication, comme l'élément clé de l'approche en quatre volets de la distance historique développée dans l'étude *On Historical Distance* (les autres volets étant l'effet, l'idéologie et la compréhension). Il s'attarde particulièrement à la linéarité, au genre, au contraste, au dialogue, au début/à la fin et aux fantômes comme dimensions de la forme. Tous ces aspects concernant les formes ont une double inflexion. D'une part, ils ont trait à une caractéristique de la forme (la narration linéaire, par exemple). D'autre part, ils soulèvent des questions plus vastes liées à la représentation historique en général (une conception de l'histoire comprise d'une manière linéaire et séquentielle qui est liée à ce que l'on entend habituellement par la distance historique/évolution historique, par exemple). L'article propose que l'idée de forme développée dans l'ouvrage de Phillips vient enrichir notre compréhension des représentations historiques et débouche sur de nouveaux questionnements critiques.

## Historical Distance and Questions of Form in 5½ Points

**BARBARA LECKIE**

### *Abstract*

*This paper isolates form, or what Mark Salber Phillips calls making, as a key component of the four-pronged approach to historical distance that he elaborates in *On Historical Distance* (the other prongs are affect, ideology, and understanding). It focuses, in particular, on linearity, genre, contrast, dialogue, beginnings/endings, and ghosts as dimensions of form. All of these aspects of forms have a double inflection: on the one hand, they relate to a characteristic of form (the linear narrative, for example) and, on the other, they raise broad questions related to historical representation in general (a conception of history understood in linear and sequential terms that is linked with historical distance conventionally understood, for example). This paper argues that the idea of form developed in Phillips' book both enriches our understanding of historical representations and opens up new questions for critical inquiry.*

### *Résumé*

*Le présent article aborde la forme, ou ce que Phillips appelle la fabrication, comme l'élément clé de l'approche en quatre volets de la distance historique développée dans l'étude *On Historical Distance* (les autres volets étant l'effet, l'idéologie et la compréhension). Il s'attarde particulièrement à la linéarité, au genre, au contraste, au dialogue, au début/à la fin et aux fantômes comme dimensions de la forme. Tous ces aspects concernant les formes ont une double inflexion. D'une part, ils ont trait à une caractéristique de la forme (la narration linéaire, par exemple). D'autre part, ils soulèvent des questions plus vastes liées à la représentation historique en général (une conception de l'histoire comprise d'une manière linéaire et séquentielle qui est liée à ce que l'on entend habituellement par la distance historique/évolution historique, par exemple). L'article propose que l'idée de forme développée dans l'ouvrage de Phillips vient enrichir notre compréhension des représentations historiques et débouche sur de nouveaux questionnements critiques.*

My response to Mark Phillips' *On Historical Distance* has its origins in a train ride from Toronto to Ottawa. At the end of the ride the train stalled between its penultimate and last stop and, at that moment, Mark Phillips and I saw each other and began to discuss, among other things, the form of scholarly books. He told me a bit about *On Historical Distance*<sup>31</sup> and I told him about some struggles I was having with the form of my own book revisions. When I later read *On Historical Distance* with an eye toward responding, I was drawn, perhaps with this conversation fresh in my mind, both to the formal aspects of Phillips' book and, more importantly, to his careful elaboration of form or what Phillips calls *making*, as a key component of the four-pronged approach to historical distance that he elaborates (the other prongs are affect, ideology, and understanding). As a literary scholar, I was especially appreciative of this focus on form; it is a dimension of interpretation that, of course, is key to my field. In this response, I am going to very loosely borrow Phillips' "episodic" formal structure of "ten experiments around a central idea" presented in ten and a half chapters and organize this response around five and a half points.<sup>32</sup> My five and a half points all burrow more closely into formal issues and so do not do full justice to the scope or indeed critical purchase of the book as a whole which insists on the *overlapping*, interconnected dimensions of distance.

At the outset Phillips notes that historical distance, for many critics, defines "the growing clarity that comes with the passage of time";<sup>33</sup> he wants to put some pressure on this assumption. After all, this privileging of distance and detachment, too, has a history that bears tracing. He accordingly reconceives distance in terms of "the wide range of mediatory purposes that shape historical representation."<sup>34</sup> We can assume, as historians have long done, that historical distance encompasses a temporal framework alone (with optimal settings for accurate historical representations) or we can, as Phillips does here, open history to an entirely new figuration of historical distance. Phillips not only unpacks the complex matters that impinge on distance in any given historical account but also offers a history of historical representation in terms of distance (that, in turn, makes a space

for voices hitherto excluded from the historical record as well as modes, such as sentiment, not fully valued and appreciated).

1. **Linearity:** All of the points that I address here have a double inflection: on the one hand, they relate to a characteristic of form (in this case, the linear narrative) and, on the other, they raise broad questions related to historical representation in general (in this case, a conception of history understood in linear and sequential terms that is linked with historical distance conventionally understood).

I initially wrote this response in ten and a half points and linearity was point five. When I got to linearity I had already begun to regret my decision to respond in this way and longed, indeed, for a linear, logically developed response. In other words, my own very modest disruption of linearity made me recognize its stakes. And in using form to foreground form I wondered and worried that the losses were greater than the gains. I mention these points now (when the reader may be wondering the same thing) because of the *impress* form makes upon one when one writes (and reads).

Phillips observes that “the customary linear conception” of history often goes hand in hand with historical distance understood as “an optimum position from which to observe the past.” He recommends, instead, “a new emphasis on distance as a complex set of engagements that combines many forms and degrees of relationship.”<sup>35</sup> *On Historical Distance* is fascinating for the ways that it asks us, in *its* structure, to rethink the very linearity it asks us to consider in a broader view. It amply demonstrates that there is no one appropriate form — linear or otherwise — from which to represent history, that forms fluctuate historically, and that different forms generate different senses of distance. Its own coverage, with enviable economy, of three periods of what Phillips calls “redistancing” — circa 1500, 1800, and 1968 — invokes and disrupts chronology (the equivocation of the *circa* is surely important) and encourages us to look *at* rather than *through* form.

2. **Genre:** Phillips’ study is keenly attuned to the difference a genre makes while at the same time reminding us that inter-

pretations are not reducible to that genre. In reading this book as a whole, I was struck by the vast array of genres consulted: historical novels, history painting, biographies, microhistories, museum installations, and even obituaries among others. Here, too, genre — understood as at once mobile, conventional, innovative, and “engaged in continuous self-renewal”<sup>36</sup> — not only shapes the story that is told but *is* part of the story that is told.

Phillips’ sense of the vitality of history in relation to our awareness of the different genres through which historians communicate is nicely captured in a metaphor: “imagine history,” he writes, “as a cluster of competing genres — a crowded Thanksgiving dinner, perhaps, where amid so many cousins the family never speaks in one voice and there are always multiple conversations going on.”<sup>37</sup> This idea returns in the middle section of his book in which we get many voices, many genres, through which history circa 1800 is relayed; history increasingly gravitates toward intimate accounts that embrace “homes, families, and communities” (192) and, in Macaulay’s words, becomes a process of calling up our ancestors, “show[ing] us over their house, . . . seat[ing] us at their tables, . . . rummag[ing] their old-fashioned wardrobes.”<sup>38</sup> By the late twentieth century, historical representations not only animate the house, the table, and the wardrobe but also invite us *into* the house — the immersive, often popular, genres that Phillips recounts — to sit at the table and to be an active participant in the story recounted or displayed.

The attention to genres — genres nesting within other genres, the dialogue between genres, the mobility and protean character of genres, the harbinger character of minor genres — and especially the reference to popular genres raise the question of the commodification of history. I am thinking, for example, of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum to which Phillips refers in passing. History is packaged in a manner that also commodifies it: we pay to experience the poverty and discomfort of those who lived within the close confines of these spaces. To be sure, this is history in one of its most affective, immersive, and “close focus” modes, but does it make a difference that it is also positioned within a consumer context? To what extent does it matter

that sympathetic responses may be entangled with museum profits? To what extent, if any, does the market have a bearing on historical distance?

The genre of *On Historical Distance* itself reminded me of Walter Benjamin's very different, "Theses on the Philosophy of History."<sup>39</sup> Benjamin's work at once foregrounds form and disrupts genre to challenge traditional linear narrative models and, in the process, challenges ideologies of progress. Phillips' book, too, is difficult to place in any one generic mode. In part because it mixes and matches so many genres, in part because it is organized around ten and a half "experiments," and in part because it is so interdisciplinary in its range, it has a crackling and vibrant energy that evades any efforts at easy categorization.

I turn now to the genre that is ostensibly least practiced in historical representation and yet is at the literal centre of this book.

**3. Contrast:** In Chapter Six, Phillips addresses contrast narratives. In literary studies we often turn to the centre of a novel for indications of key issues, but it may seem ill-advised to suggest that this chapter, at odds with the others in some ways, is at the heart of *On Historical Distance*. Still, let's consider the following: this chapter focuses on several works that have an "eccentricity of design" and are unabashedly bold and experimental in their forms; these works are amorphous, hybrid, and distinct from traditional, linear histories; this chapter interweaves images (and indeed includes the book's colour plates); Phillips refers to Hume's "contrastive habit" in the context of the "the essentially contrastive structure of historical understanding";<sup>40</sup> and the issues that the chapter addresses, while unique and not often repeated, nevertheless radiate out to embrace not only the beginning of the book (the study in contrasts in chapter 2) but also the last section (the contrast as counterfactual) in chapter 10. Moreover, as Phillips notes, "historical thought is inescapably comparative," but its formal structures, with a tendency toward the "sequential and continuous," rarely acknowledge its comparative dimensions.<sup>41</sup> Phillips' book, with its ten and a half experiments, its "comparative structure," its openness to different genres (the contrast narratives themselves are notable,

in part, because of their genre-inclusivity), and its engagement with tensions between linear narratives and history's "overlapping temporalities," then, resonates with many of the issues raised in this chapter.<sup>42</sup>

I want to pause here on the interleaving of the colour plates in this section. It may not seem worthy of mention especially since it is likely an accident of the book's production. But these sorts of formal accidents also have an impact on our reading experience. First, the plates create a back and forth movement of reading that interrupts the linear process of turning pages. With the plates, we read radially instead of sequentially. Second, the placement of the plates reminds us that we are reading a *book*. It invites a consideration of the impact digital technologies have on the mediation of history not only in the immersive terms addressed briefly in the last section of the book (IMAX etc.), but also in terms of digital reading that inscribes interruptions into its very reading practice.

By making this chapter the heart of the book, however, I have neglected the heart itself: affect, feeling, and sentiment. And, indeed, one of the losses of my focus on form, in general, is that it does not do justice to Phillips' reflection on the affect (feeling) prong of his mediatory framework. To be sure, each dimension of this framework is bound up with the others and so Carlyle's prose, for example, in contrast narratives or otherwise, is amongst the most fiery and passionate of the writers to whom Phillips refers. Carlyle calls for histories in which, Phillips writes, "the strong pulse of individual life can still be felt."<sup>43</sup> And this pulse, with its intimations of the heart, also runs through this book as a whole.

Phillips argues that history writing has steadily expanded its purview from conventional history with its records of "the deeds of warriors and statesmen," its focus on "what happened," and its privileging of heroes and exemplarity, to a view that embraces everyday life, psychological inwardness, affect, and all of the ordinary events, people, and things so often excluded from official historical records.<sup>44</sup> This expanded range of representation made me wonder about the degree to which the content of one's

historical focus drives one's formal choices. "If writing history was to involve a wider array of experiences," Phillips suggests, "historians would need to rework their customary tools for representing and explaining the past."<sup>45</sup> If they wanted to extend their representational range from, say, warriors to women, formal adaptations and modifications would have to be made. But is this necessarily the case? In other words, do these shifts relate to emotion and affect first, from which the embrace of a wider array of experiences follow? Or do they begin with a desire to represent a wider array of experiences and find that the forms that accentuate and cultivate emotion and affect are the most congenial means to do so? And how does that sought-after "elusive prize of historical description," "inwardness" mesh with the expansion of historical range?<sup>46</sup> Is it an umbrella term under which other items are arranged or is it one goal among many? And, if the latter, then how to explain its privilege?

David Hume can perhaps offer some insight here. When the historian brings history nearer, makes it more immediate, in Hume's words, "our hearts are immediately caught, our sympathy enlivened."<sup>47</sup> The immediacy is bound up in the intimacy and the pulse of the heart. Or as Phillips later puts it in a passage that suggests that content does drive form to a degree, "when we shift our focus from 'things done' to 'things experienced,' we turn our attention from the actions themselves to the states of mind and heart that give those actions meaning."<sup>48</sup> "[A] strong emotional pulse," Phillips further writes, "animates our histories, giving vitality to so much of what our age finds 'worthy of note' in another."<sup>49</sup> A focus on "things experienced," that is, engages the heart — and with it sentiment, affect, and emotion — and invites new forms and modes through which to capture what it felt like to be there.<sup>50</sup>

These brief comments on affect have interrupted — and "interruption" is itself a key term that could have easily been included on my list — my five and a half points on form. I will return to them now.

**4. Dialogue:** In his introduction, Phillips cites Hans George Gadamer's description of history as "a communicative process



built on the model of dialogue.”<sup>51</sup> This comment nicely chimes with the example of the Thanksgiving dinner. But dialogue is also a formal feature of some history writing. Chapter 6, for example, includes a discussion of Southey’s dialogue form — in which the ghost of Sir Thomas More converses with Montesiños (a stand-in for Southey) in the present.<sup>52</sup> History here, even if unsuccessfully presented, is imagined as an ongoing conversation between the past and present. Phillips writes: “the idea that historical thought involves a dialogue between two distinct moments finds no acknowledgment in history’s formal structure.”<sup>53</sup> Not usually. Works that adopt a dialogue structure to convey the historical past are, then, especially interesting. Dialogue frays beginning and endings as it also accentuates the constant movements between voices and the potential for “inter-subjective exchange[s].”<sup>54</sup> *On Historical Distance* does not include any dialogues with ghosts, but it is keenly attuned to the dialogic and to history writing as a constant implicit dialogue with those who came before.

**5. Beginnings/Endings:** Initially, this list began with beginnings and ended with endings (and had “list” as one of its terms). But by combining beginnings and endings, I want to more clearly put them into dialogue, *pace* the above entry, with each other. How do beginnings have a bearing on endings and how do both relate to historical distance in relation to formal structure? And how do the “origin stories” of historical movements inform both?<sup>55</sup> Related to the question of beginnings, is also the thematization of origins that is so often part of academic practice (my anecdote at the outset about how this project began is one small example of this point). The project’s genesis becomes a part of the story one tells; it abbreviates distance and binds the story to the teller.

In the context of this book, I was interested in the fact that Phillips, too, begins with an anecdote that relates to the project’s origins in the Preface and then, in the Introduction, begins with a more traditional and sequential historical account. Interestingly, the Preface and the Introduction are bound together — and mediated — by the Acknowledgments, that is, by the commu-

nity of scholars, friends, and family that makes works such as this possible but that also, in ways both obvious and obscure, shapes historical distance.

5½. **Ghosts:** History may always be, in part, the story of ghosts mediating between the past and the present, even if its formal structures tend to efface this point. The ghost, taken seriously, perhaps comes closest to harnessing respect for a time distant from our own (they lived there and we did not) and, at the same time, gives us a sense of what it felt like to be there (Phillips' pressing question of the circa 1968 histories: what did it feel like to be there?). In this sense, Michelet's energetic history of the people, itself an explicit revival project of ghosts, inaugurates a distance shift by which many of the texts Phillips discusses are directly or indirectly informed. Ghosts are not quiet, they have claims to make, accounts to close, and stories to tell. I conclude with this reference to ghosts because, perhaps more than any other figure, they are a conceit that we are invited both to see and to see through; in this way, they provoke us, as Phillips also does, to look *at* form rather than only through it.

*On Historical Distance* offers an expansive vision of historical representation. It shares a great deal with the historical approaches post 1800 that enlarge the purview of historical representation and, especially post 1968, reveal the "previously unobserved."<sup>56</sup> Phillips' skill — like that of the eighteenth-century writer and editor Anna Barbaud to whom he refers — is to make us see what we might not have otherwise: the rhythms and shifts in historical distance over time and the overlapping, multiple registers in which any understanding of distance must be interpreted. And, in the context of my comments here, he reminds us that form, too, is always part of the story that is told.

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