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CONVERSATION

The past is not a foreign country: a conversation

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ABSTRACT

In this interview, Marek Tamm asks questions concerning some of the main developments and arguments in Eelco Runia's thinking about history. The following topics are discussed: the relations between history, psychology and fiction; the critique of representationalism in the contemporary philosophy of history; the presence of the past; the question of continuity, discontinuity and mutation in history; the importance of metonymy as the quintessential historical trope; the influence of Giambattista Vico on Runia's thinking; the intellectual affinities between Runia and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht; and Runia's ongoing research project on Red Queen history.

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Tamm: You were trained in history and psychology at Leiden University, have practised for some years as a psychologist at the Faculty of Medicine of the Erasmus University Rotterdam and have had a private practice as a coach/supervisor for medical doctors. How did you end up in the philosophy of history? What made this domain attractive for you? And to what extent do you agree that you pursue in this domain the problems that have often been first formulated in psychology or psychoanalysis?¹

Runia: The first thing that springs to mind is how, as a child, I witnessed how the lively stories my mother was telling (for example) about life during the German occupation were cruelly deconstructed by my sceptic father. I had to acknowledge that as far as facts were concerned my father was probably right, but I couldn't accept that my mother's liveliness was not, in a sense, truthful as well. At the time, I wouldn't have been able to tell what was at stake in these painful conversations, but now I can see, I think, that what my mother was really trying to do was to honour and express

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something that is just as valuable as the facts, something that one might call the fullness of life. Unfortunately, she did so in a form – the hyperbolic personal history – that was no match for my father's scorching criticism.

I have always associated my double study – history as well as psychology – with my desire to understand what happens when experiences, like my mother's, are translated into stories. I had a vague notion that psychology was about 'experiences' and history about 'stories' – so I thought all I had to do was to study both. Ironically, psychology didn't teach me anything about experiences and history, as it was taught at university at the time, didn't teach me anything about stories.

Of course, by presenting my motivation for studying both psychology and history in this way, I myself am also very much in the business of translating experiences into an appealing story. Reality was much, much messier than my story about my parents suggests, though I still have no doubt that there was a kind of passion involved. An alternative, and more robust, story would be that at a very early age I started an expedition to discover what I was so passionate about. And that only much later I realized what should have been obvious all along: that it was the process rather than the goal that mattered.

Somewhere between these two points I made two decisions. The first was that I had no choice but to try to make a living with the expertise and the diplomas I had gathered almost incidentally along the way – and because I could get a job as a psychologist I stumbled upon a career as a psychologist and, later, as a supervisor for medical doctors. The second decision was that it didn't make sense to wait till I would finally know what my fascination entailed before starting to write about it. And that's precisely what I did: I started to write seriously.

The articles I began to publish were 'essays' in the original meaning of the term: attempts to simultaneously express myself and to explore what I was after. I considered myself first and foremost a writer, and I didn't much care to which 'discipline' my essays belonged. Then, in 2003, I was so presumptuous as to try to combine the obligation to earn a living and my insuppressible desire to write about my elusive fascination by applying for a big grant. On the application form I had to indicate a discipline – so I filled in 'philosophy of history'. I guessed that that would leave me ample space to do whatever I liked. Much to my surprise, I got the grant without even having to show up for an interview. So, in a sense it is indeed quite accurate to say that I 'ended up in

philosophy of history'. On the other hand, however, I do not consider philosophy of history as my destination of choice and have in fact left the university in 2018 to become an independent writer and lecturer.

Tamm: Next to your career as a psychologist, you have also written a couple of novels, which are thematically close to your interests as a historical theorist. First, in 2003, *Inkomend vuur* ('Incoming Fire') about the Dutch mission to Srebrenica in 1995 (Runia 2003), and then, in 2008, *Breukvlak* ('Fault Line'), which explores how reality has to be buried in a text in order to keep it alive (Runia 2008). How do you see the relations between your work as a theorist and a novelist? Is one feeding the other? And has this double experience helped you to sort out the old dilemma of the difference between history and fiction?

Runia: I don't think that my novels feed my non-fiction or the other way around. That doesn't mean, however, that the question is not right on target. A part of the answer springs from what I said in response to the previous question. All my writings are stations on a journey inspired by the desire to know what I am after. They are exercises in self-expression – in which you discover what you have to say by saying it (to paraphrase E. M. Forster's famous words). I very much believe that in every book or article (be it fiction or non-fiction) you have to transcend yourself, and that transcending yourself is nothing else than *surprising* yourself.

Reassuringly – or agonizingly – that process never ends: if you definitively find out what you were after you are dead. Though, in my narcissistic moments, I value self-expression (and the accompanying literary form of the essay) because I believe I have important things to say, I know deep down that the exact content of what I write hardly matters, that self-expression has a worth of its own. What I am longing for is, in fact, the Roman and Renaissance ideal of the *vir virtutis* – the man whose morality consists in acknowledging his experiences, in synthesizing his experiences in opinions, in daring to be outspoken and in being enough of a rhetorician to know how to have his compatriots pay attention to what he has to say. And, last but not least, in getting rid of his opinions the moment they become empty words.

It's kind of strange that now I've left the university, the 14 years I was an academic do not feel like a career but rather like a kind of education, a preparation for what I'm doing right now: trying to articulate a personal vision of what's going on in current society. Which makes me think that I had the same sensation (of finally having 'arrived') when I entered academia

14 years ago. These must be instances of what Merleau-Ponty said: ‘with the arrival of every moment, its predecessor undergoes a change’ (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 484).

The second part of the answer to your question is that I’m much more interested in exploring the possibilities of fiction and non-fiction than in theorizing about them. Or rather: I wasn’t really interested in whether what I was writing counted as fiction or as non-fiction. In *Het Srebrenicasyndroom* (‘The Syndrome of Srebrenica’), for example, I dramatize my own role as a historian (Runia 2015). The book is not a *result* (that is, a description of what I found out) but a kind of detective-story in which I gradually discover the astonishing truth of how the Dutch Srebrenica researchers re-enacted their subject. Rather naively, I have always cherished the illusion that a hybrid work like *Het Srebrenicasyndroom* would be accepted as a specimen of bona fide of historical (or philosophical, or whatever) research. It was not. Neither *Breukvlak* nor *Het Srebrenicasyndroom* – which I regard as belonging to my most original works – was taken seriously by the academic world. No reviews in the academic journals, no discussion, no nominations, no follow up.

Thinking about, as you say, ‘the dilemma of the difference between history and fiction’, I suddenly realize that I *did* in fact address the question of how history compares to fiction. One of the issues I address in my dissertation about Tolstoy’s ideas about history and historiography (in *War and Peace*) is to what extent Tolstoy’s depiction of Russia’s struggle with Napoleon may count as history or as fiction. The answer to that question turned out to be less interesting than the fact that the question brings to light quite a few of the hidden presuppositions of nineteenth-century historicism. The case of Tolstoy shows that trying to determine the fictionality of what presents itself as the true, non-fictive stories of history is often a scholastic enterprise. In Tolstoy, in any case, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is less than helpful. As everybody who has read *War and Peace* in its entirety knows only too well, Tolstoy couldn’t resist philosophizing about history (and his views are provocative enough) but in my book I show that his most valuable, and his most radical, ‘theoretical’ notions are embodied in his fiction – in the way he goes about showing the adventures of his heroes and heroines.

The third part of the answer is that I’ve always had an ambivalent attitude towards the phenomenon of ‘form’ – which for me includes everything from syntaxes via tropes to genre. On the one hand, I greatly appreciate the potent but also very liberating effect

of 'form'. There is a tendency – very much implicit in Hayden White's notion of 'the content of the form' (White 1987) – to assume that form is by definition reductive prefiguration. Perhaps it is a remnant of the 1960s: that form is an authoritarian restriction that prevents you from saying precisely what you want to say. I disagree. I can only say that, in my experience, the strong hand of form may force you to really come into your own, and may leave you no choice but to come forward with surprising things you wouldn't have thought of when there had been no form to oblige. That, by the way, is not just a personal predilection – many writers and many of the great historians of the past bear witness to the creative potential of 'form'. The quality of Johan Huizinga, for example, resides to a large extent in how he handled the enormous tension between what he 'saw' (what came to be known as 'historical sensation') and his determination to present his insights in an accomplished prose style.

On the other hand ... or rather: a seemingly contradictory consequence of what I just said ... is that I like to *experiment* with form. Not with the aspects of form that make writing accessible and enjoyable, but with form as a heuristic and epistemological tool. I believe that form has brought me to places I wouldn't have visited when I had just 'written things down'. The book I'm currently completing, an essay about the sorry state of universities, has the form of letters (Runia 2019). This form turned out to have both great analytical and rhetorical potential. I'm a staunch believer in (to paraphrase Frederick the Great) the rhetorics of the oblique attack. And having you read over someone else's shoulder to see what I wrote about *you* is quite an effective form.

Because this interview is probably not a good venue to discuss the experimental character of *all* my books, I'll just point to my novel *Breukvlak*. This novel in the form of a weblog is a philosophical experiment with myself. The protagonist of *Breukvlak* practises a kind of 'reverse archaeology'. Whereas an archaeologist tries to fathom what life is suggested by the artefacts he finds in the ground, the protagonist of *Breukvlak* explores the question of what he has to put *into* 'the ground' (that is, his weblog) in order to give a truthful image of his life. I didn't realize it when I wrote the book, but from a philosophical perspective he tries to outsmart prefiguration. The hero is obsessed with the fact that certain experiences, scenes, encounters, things 'ask' to be depicted that they are the writerly equivalent for what in photography is called 'photogenic'. Writing about these things, and the forms this writing takes, is prefigured by clichés about what to

depict and how to do it. The hero of *Breukvlak* tries to literally ‘circumvent’ prefiguration by devising a method of ‘focusing on the periphery’ – which strictly speaking is of course a contradiction in terms, but that he believes enables him to catch and depict life *in flagrante delicto*. The consequence of this method is that, to the extent the hero succeeds in focusing on the periphery, the ‘centre’ (the hero’s love for the woman he had to leave behind) gets shrouded in silence and becomes ‘conspicuously present by its absence’.

Tamm: Your main impulse in the field of philosophy of history has been to move beyond the ‘linguistic turn’ that shaped the field since 1970s. Your work is carried out by the desire ‘to escape from the mirror palace of representation’ (Runia 2010c, 231). Or as a recent reviewer put it: ‘A critique of representationalism is at the heart of Runia’s argument’ (Banerjee 2015, 963). In this respect, one could claim that you have built your whole work in reaction to the paradigm that was dominant in your formative years. The basic problem that this kind of approach faces is how ‘to re-establish some form of contact with “external reality” without lapsing into “naïve realism”’, as you once put it (Runia 2010d, 249). What would be your solution, if explained once again?

Runia: I wouldn’t say that my work is a ‘reaction to the paradigm of representationalism’ but it is certainly true that I felt I had to take on ‘representationalism’ in order to free myself from it. Looking back, it’s difficult to entangle the threads of sympathy and antipathy that tied me to representationalism. As a student, I bought or (if need be) stole the interesting books my professors didn’t talk about. The iconic book for me was probably Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* and, though at the time I didn’t quite understand what Derrida was up to, I was intrigued by the fact that he seemed to take the words of earlier thinkers not at face value, but felt free to use them for his own purposes (Derrida 1976). I notice that I’ve used the word ‘free’ two times by now – and indeed, the sense of freedom that emanates from Derrida, Foucault and all the others must have been a major attraction.

My interest during my student days in representationalism has to be seen in context. I couldn’t understand why my professors were devoting complete seminars to the presidents of the Third Republic or John Adams’ image of the Netherlands – and because they dutifully didn’t give me the things I craved for – inspiring, counterintuitive and meaningful insights into the relationship between experience and story – I was easy prey for Derrida and Foucault. It is entirely possible that for me the attraction of

representationalism was that these structuralists and deconstructionists promised the antithesis of what they were in fact engaged in: that they had found a 'substantive' meta-explanation of the chaotic back and forth of history.

Be that as it may, by the time I started to write my dissertation I was determined to vindicate experience and to radically distance myself from Whitean representationalism. If the 'linguistic turn' was the *non plus ultra* – which at the time it certainly was – I wanted to go further. As a psychologist, I can hardly rule out the possibility that my determination had less to do with the content of the books I wanted to leave behind than with an oedipal wish to get rid of my father and create a space in which I could come into my own – a hypothesis by the way that coincides with Hayden White's characterization of me as 'a prince who wants to kill the king'. But even if this hypothesis were true, it is not at all clear whether my relation to representationalism is primarily a re-enactment of my father's dismissal of what sounds good but doesn't stand up to scrutiny or, rather, an attempt to defend my mother's desire to pass on the fullness of life against the attack that her passionate tales were 'nothing but stories'.

But it remains to be seen whether the Oedipus theory is correct. I can only say that when I was feverishly writing my 'Presence' piece (Runia 2006a), I was not so much thrilled by the destruction I brought about as by the sense that I was out in the open and initiating something completely new. In any case, my work on presence freed me from my theoretical superego and enabled me to move on from critical to substantive philosophy of history and to do what for historians is an absolute taboo: to engage in 'speculation' about (some of) the mechanisms of history. Your question though, by calling my determination to move beyond the linguistic turn my 'main impulse', proves the ironic fact that people tend to be defined by what they try to overcome.

Tamm: Your first texts in the philosophy of history were written in Dutch, including your first two books, the PhD thesis, *De pathologie van de veldslag: Geschiedenis en geschiedschrijving in Tolstoj's Oorlog en Vrede* ('The Pathology of Battle: History and Historiography in Tolstoy's War and Peace', Runia 1995), and a second book, *Waterloo Verdun Auschwitz: de liquidatie van het verleden* ('Waterloo Verdun Auschwitz: The Liquidation of the Past', Runia 1999). Unfortunately, like many other colleagues in the world, I suppose, I'm not able to read these books; therefore, I wonder if you would agree to summarize the main arguments of

these early works. If I'm not mistaken, these books are already explorations of the non-discursive reality of history?

Runia: I wrote *The Pathology of Battle* very much as an outsider: at the time I worked as a psychologist, I wasn't acquainted with the academic world and didn't know how to behave in philosophical discussions. In the book, I tried to fathom from *War and Peace* what Tolstoy's 'philosophy of history' looked like. Along the way, I took issue with both the sophisticated historicism of Ranke and his followers and the metahistorical frivolity of the Whiteans. So you could say that Tolstoy's *War and Peace* was my Cicerone: I used myself to make sense of Tolstoy, and I used Tolstoy to make sense of my disassembled and naïve intuitions about the relation between life and narrative. The result was that I furnished myself with a point of view that I still cannot pinpoint exactly but that I have never left.

I still think my reading of Tolstoy struck a rich vein. It has often been said that it is by definition impossible to bring stories and experiences, representations and embodiments, on the same plane, but that is exactly what Tolstoy manages to do in *War and Peace*. Tolstoy's heroes not only *talk* about history (in general, as a phenomenon) and about concrete historical events, but they also *embody* history and constitute, make (or 'commit') the events that come to be known as 'historic'. So *War and Peace* enabled me to overcome the timeliness of both narrativism and historicism and to deal with the phenomenon of incommensurability.

Because *The Pathology of Battle* was shortlisted for a major literary prize, I felt more invited to amplify my essayistic method than to try to establish an academic bridgehead. Consequently, my second book, *Waterloo Verdun Auschwitz*, is an 'undisciplined' exploration into the question how historical traumata are 'liquidated'. Liquidated in the double meaning of the term: I wanted to know how unmanageable, indigestible events are made so 'liquid' as to be taken up in the 'blood circulation' of a culture. I also wanted to know how historical traumata cease to exist as an operative force and are relegated to the past.

Waterloo Verdun Auschwitz consists of both 'reportages' and essayistic explorations – in such a way that each essay borders on a reportage. In the reportages, I use myself as a seismographic instrument – sensitized by what I know, I walk over the battlefields of Waterloo and Verdun and the site of the Auschwitz death camp and try to register the extent in which the past is still present behind all the layers of commemorations. At the time I hadn't heard about W. G. Sebald (his books weren't even

published, I think) but these reportages are Sebald-like pilgrimages on the treacherous surface of guilty landscapes.

As to your question: neither *The Pathology of Battle* nor *Waterloo Verdun Auschwitz* has a summarizable ‘argument’, which doesn’t mean that I didn’t have strong opinions. I summed them up in the preface to *Moved by the Past*: my lapidary Ten-Point Programme for a new philosophy of history is that I wanted to move from continuity to discontinuity, from historiography to history, from meaning to presence, from metaphor to metonymy, from representation to incarnation, from story to monument, from epistemology to ontology, from identity to estrangement, from *allopoiesis* to *autopoiesis* and from imagination to invention (Runia 2014: xiv–xv).

Tamm: Your American work (if I can use this label), consisting mostly of essays, written in a personal and captivating style, turns around some key issues that I would like to discuss further with you. The first issue is that of ‘presence’. You define this concept in an eponymous essay as “‘being in touch’ – either literally or figuratively – with people, things, events, and feelings that made you into the person you are’ (Runia 2006a, 5).² But the presence of the past is not necessarily sublime, it can be also horrifying, ‘the past may have a presence that is so powerful that it can use us, humans, as its *material*’ (Runia 2006b, 308). This brings you to an important statement that philosophers of history should ‘focus not on the past but on the present, not on history *as what is irremediably gone*, but on history *as ongoing process*’ (Runia 2006a, 8). This statement problematizes the very concept of the past and makes me want to ask what it actually means, in your understanding, for something or someone to be ‘past’, to ‘belong to history’? You seem to follow William Faulkner’s well-known line, ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past’ (Faulkner 1951, 92).

Runia: Faulkner’s line suggests that the past is a kind of limbo between life and death, an intermediate stage between the present and oblivion. Faulkner thus mystifies the ontological status of the past in much the same way as historians are inclined to do. With my notion of presence, I wanted to radicalize something that can already be found in the ‘realist project’ of the beginning of the nineteenth century (but that was forgotten in the course of that century). This realist project can be regarded as a sustained attempt to equate the real with the present. Its credo is: what is real exists, what exists is real, what is not real does not exist and what does not exist is not real.

What attracted me to this realist project is that it is not a regression to immediacy. Quite the contrary, the crux of the realist project was to not restrict reality to what is directly at hand, to, that is, the evanescence of the moment, but to have it encompass that part of the past that 'went into the present', to, that is, that part of the past that gave the present the form in which we come to know it. Hegel, the philosopher-in-chief of the realist project, saved history, that is to say, affirmed its reality, by postulating that what was really 'real' about it was present in the here and now. He didn't deny that history couldn't be seen, heard or felt, and that, in that sense, it wasn't present anymore, but he insisted that history *was* present – and, consequently, real – in how it had given the here and now the form it most ostensibly had.

The notion of presence draws attention to the fact that the past *continues* to give the here and now – and, because of that, the future – its form. In that sense, the past is most certainly not a 'foreign country' – as the popular saying goes – but, as Freud said, '*eine aktuelle Macht*'. It is operative in the here and now and may make you do things that are not included in what you regard as your identity. This is what the title of my book *Moved by the Past* refers to. Presence is thus the antithesis of Whitean prefiguration: whereas prefiguration entails the rather commonsensical idea that the observer/historian prefigures the past, presence highlights the fact that we can be, in fact *are*, prefigured by the past. And this 'we' very much includes the historian writing about the past. In my book *Het Srebrenicasyndroom*, I show how spectacular this prefiguration can be. It was unwittingly demonstrated by the highly competent Dutch historians who studied the Srebrenica-debacle: they re-enacted significant aspects of *what* they studied in *how* they studied it.

The presence-idea is not just a theory about temporality but also a heuristic tool – in much the same way as modern psychoanalysts³ try to be aware of how they are subconsciously manipulated by their patients (or, as they call it, through 'countertransference') and to use these subtle manipulations as ways to understand what really bothers them. I have worked quite a while as a supervisor for medical doctors and was always struck by the fact that the way they nudged my perspective in a specific, 'politically correct', direction was a very valuable source of information of what *really* had happened. As a supervisor, I came to appreciate the fact that when the way the past is active in the here and now dawns on you, you *by that very fact* catch a glimpse of

what this active past looks like. Which leads to the somewhat uncomfortable conclusion that, in the sense that I believe that there is a match between medium and message, I'm an old-fashioned 'historical realist'.

Tamm: The concept of 'presence' points to the main philosophical question you are preoccupied with, namely the problem of continuity and discontinuity in history. Historiography is a great tool for creating continuity and historicism a great strategy to hide any possible discontinuities. Your philosophical endeavour consists in developing a theory that could accommodate discontinuity without domesticating it. But what makes discontinuity the key issue in the philosophy of history? And in what respect does your approach differ from two other great 'discontinuist thinkers', Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault?

Runia: I think my teachers would unanimously have agreed with the admonition of the level-headed Dutch historian Ernst Kossmann that every historical endeavour 'that zooms in on discontinuity, on rupture and destruction, threatens to dissolve in a meaningless succession of isolated events', and would, because of that, result in 'a kind of story one should not allow oneself to tell' (Kossmann 1995, 9, my translation – E.R.) Instead, Kossmann argued, historians should focus on how 'century after century, people have tried to present their transitory deeds and concoctions as links in a chain, steps on a road, stages in a continuous progression' (Kossmann 1995, 10, my translation – E.R.). It's the mantra of historians: 'Continuity is the essence of all historical study.' Even as a student, this story I was 'not allowed to tell' was precisely the story I wanted to tell. And I didn't believe that it necessarily had to be meaningless.

For me, discontinuity was a key issue because it refuses to negate the experiential and existential riddle that nobody who is in his right mind sees ground-breaking events (as they are rightly called) coming, but that afterwards they seem eminently logical. This, of course, was also 'the riddle of history' that Tolstoy tries to solve in *War and Peace*. Even as a student I sensed that we shouldn't domesticate this riddle by implying that these ground-breaking events just 'happen to us' (and that they are created by 'others' who are slightly, but significantly, different from ourselves) and that we should, instead, take the position that it is *we ourselves* that bring the new about. It took me some time to put it into words, but from very early on I wanted to work, as a historian, from the position that we cannot but surprise ourselves with what we turn out to be doing. As I write in the

introduction to *Moved by the Past*, ‘there’s no escaping it: history progresses by unforeseeable leaps and bounds – leaps and bounds that are neither implied nor determined by what the actors – that is, ultimately, we ourselves – bring to the diving board’ (Runia 2014, xiii).

Taking discontinuity so seriously has quite a few implications. One of them is that, for historians, rational choice theory is of very limited value. Rational choice may explain behaviour in ‘normal’ circumstances but is helpless in the face of ground-breaking (and, by definition, discontinuous) events. These events are characterized by participants throwing calculations about what is in their best interest into the wind and fleeing to god knows where. For psychologists, who take it as an axiom that ‘loss aversion’ trumps the maximization of possible gains, these events – in which people put their way of living on the line – are thoroughly anomalistic. The fact, however, that these events do occur and that it is up to historians to explain them – shows that history is at least as much the ‘science of human nature’ (as the eighteenth-century historians would have said) as psychology.

Another implication is that it makes us (in general, and historians in particular) face the epistemological problem of how to fathom earlier worldviews – or, perhaps more accurately, it forces that problem to the fore of historical thought. If it is true that a defining feature of discontinuities is that they are at odds with the worldview from which they spring, then every discontinuity forces us to bring our worldview in line with the fact of its happening. This indeed is what I believe – a belief nicely summarized by Goethe’s *‘Im Anfang ist die Tat’*: first there is a discontinuous event and then, by a process of dissonance reduction, this event is liquidated into a worldview from which it seems logical, or at the very least, possible. The paradoxical – and epistemologically problematic – consequence of this sequence is, however, that coming to terms with a discontinuous event changes us into people who didn’t ‘commit’ this event.

I will sketch out below how one of the things that attracted me to Giambattista Vico is that he suggests an answer to the question of how to get access to the succession of worldviews that have made us into what we are. For now, I can only agree with you that my taking discontinuity seriously (and my connecting it with the notion of worldviews) begs the question of how my approach resembles that of Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault.

As to Foucault, I must say that at the time I read him, much of what he said about discontinuity sounded (to me at least) rather

self-evident. Which, of course, may be just another example of the fact that once you're 'in' a worldview you can hardly imagine how revolutionary it was when it was born. When he said, in an interview, that 'the rhythm of transformation doesn't follow the smooth, continuist schemas of development which are normally accepted' (Foucault 1980, 111) and argued that 'it is not possible to see history as the rational deployment of a historical becoming, going on from the Renaissance and ending with modernity' (Choque Aliaga 2018, 40) or that history has no *telos*, I could only nod in agreement. It may well be, however, that the sheer fact that one of his main concepts was the *episteme* may have emboldened me: apparently thinking in and about worldviews was OK. But I remember how, reading the *History of Madness* (Foucault 2006), I was disappointed with Foucault's not explaining, or even describing, how epistemes mutate one into another.

I do not know, or want to know, in what respects my approach differs from Thomas Kuhn's. What I do know, however, is that I have always regarded Kuhn's 'absurdity principle' a great tool for sensitizing students for the discontinuities in the history of ideas. In fact, this absurdity principle ['When reading the works of an important thinker, look first for the apparent absurdities in the text and ask yourself how a sensible person could have written them' (Kuhn 1977, xii)] was one of the main themes of the lectures on the history of historical thinking I gave each year in Groningen. So, rather than starting out from what my students would have accepted easily, I zoomed in on outrageous claims like Thucydides' insistence that the Peloponnesian war was 'the greatest war ever', Machiavelli's thesis that *fortuna* 'is a woman that should be beaten', Ranke's notion that 'nations are the thoughts of God' and so on, in order to show my students the ground-breaking originality of these writers.

Tamm: Discontinuity is closely connected to another question you are deeply interested in, namely that of how the new comes about in history, or, as you more elegantly put it, 'how, in an endless series of metamorphoses, we have transformed and continue to transform ourselves into who we are' (Runia 2014, xv).⁴ This issue leads us also to another domain you seem to be very attached to, namely the theory of (cultural) evolution, and allows me to ask to what extent can discontinuities and novelties in history be compared to 'mutations' in the evolution of humanity?

Runia: Though I definitely think that evolutionary theory can be useful in explaining how we have become what we are, I am wary of the way scholars in the humanities tend to apply biological concepts

to the field of history. They are, first, very much inclined to remove revolution from our evolution. Books like David Christian's *Maps of Time* portray human cultural evolution as a continuous progress in which time and again we kept what we had and added something that made life even better (Christian 2004). My second objection is that evolutionary, 'big' historians tend to present our cultural evolution as the result of our own smartness, the result of understanding that it was in our best interest as a species to learn to use symbols, to write, to make laws, to invent a printing press, to agree that democracy was really the best political system and so on. Many 'big' historians seem to extol an evolutionary variant of what came to be known as 'the Whig interpretation of history'. A conference about Big History I visited a couple of years ago hosted an exhibition with the title 'And then there was us'. And indeed, there isn't much of a difference between Thomas Babington Macaulay's belief that English history culminated in the political structure and the civilized manners of nineteenth-century gentlemanly Britain and the belief that the pinnacle of human cultural evolution is the historian who understands it.

My own theorizing starts from the axiom that – in biology as well as in history – evolution has two key features: heritable variation and competitive selection. But whereas most other evolutionary historians tend to focus on the creation of heritable variation (aka cultural change), I would like to suggest that we'd better zoom in on how humans succeed in maintaining high levels of selectiveness. In *Moved by the Past*, I argue that in evolutionary biology competitive selection is hardly if ever treated as an *explanandum*. It is a kind of *given*, a part of the answer to how the other ingredient – heritable variation – comes about. Which is hardly surprising: in the natural world selectiveness comes for free; it's simply the result of other species also engaging in the struggle for resources. In culturally mediated evolution, however, it is a problem. It is a problem because variation *needs* selectiveness – and one of the features of the Anthropocene is that humans are no longer in competition with other species.

The bottom line of my theory is that humans kept their evolution going (and, if anything, even accelerated it) because the more they disarmed their environment, the more they became *their own* environment. Having reached that point, however, I got stuck. I could only move ahead when I realized two things. The first is that selectiveness need not necessarily be a kind of steady state: in order to work, it can very well be intermittent and local.

A second eye-opener was when, reading the book by Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb, I learned that, contrary to received opinion, even at the level of the genes, mutations need not be random accidents (Jablonka and Lamb 2005). Mutations can be uncannily precise responses to sudden leaps in the selectiveness of the environment ('catastrophes'), a phenomenon that is called 'stress-induced mutation'.

I think this notion of 'stress-induced mutation' is an extremely fruitful concept for historians wanting to understand the discontinuities of history. I still remember the excitement when – walking in the snowy surroundings of the remote house I lived in – it occurred to me that whereas animals need an external cause to enter an evolutionary rapid, humans could have learned that they didn't have to *wait* for 'mutation-inducing' catastrophes – but that they could bring them about by themselves. This, in fact, became the substance of the theory I described tentatively in the last chapter of *Moved by the Past* and will elaborate in *Red Queen History*: somehow humans have learned to re-inject the selectiveness that they have taken away from nature into the culture they inhabit, they have discovered that it is evolutionary advantageous to be 'their own best enemy'.

Which brings me to your question about what I regard as 'historical mutations'. One of the things I like about the notion of stress-induced mutation is that it suggests a mechanism for how '*Im Anfang ist die Tat*' works. It implies that it is *not* the events we call 'historic' that constitute 'historical mutations' – rather, it is the 'catastrophes' that eventually *induce* mutations. So, the election of Donald Trump, Brexit and the success of populism are, in my view, not mutations but catastrophes – in the sense that they create levels of 'stress' that force the respective societies to mutate in new and unprecedented ways in experiencing and organizing themselves. Another, for historians quite counterintuitive, implication of my theory is that it locates 'stress' not before but *after* the event. Historians like to explain 'historic' events by connecting them to the 'tensions' that precede them. My thesis, however, implies that it is the other way around: Donald Trump was not elected because of the 'stress' built up in the Obama era, but it is rather his election that *creates* stress. And it is this stress that induces mutations (in the form of fundamental cultural and political change).

This doesn't mean, needless to say, that I claim that there is no 'stress' in what later turns out to be the calm before the storm. Of course there is. There always is. What I do suggest, however, is

that we as a species may have learned that in the long run it is in our best interest to not always comply to the adage ‘better safe than sorry’, and that it pays to occasionally take the risk of *having* to say sorry. Around the turn of the century, the Netherlands was regarded as one of the happiest and best-governed countries in the world. Even Tony Blair and Bill Clinton voiced their admiration for ‘the Dutch miracle’. Yet – or, as I would say: because of that – the neophyte populist Pim Fortuyn gained huge popularity in an incredibly short time, and the country really seemed prepared to give him a try. I think it may be rewarding to resist the temptation to explain Fortuyn’s success by trying to show that in retrospect the country was not that happy after all. Perhaps Fortuyn profited from – and contributed to – a sentiment that the country needed some stress in order to mutate.

Tamm: An important conceptual tool you have introduced in order to discuss the phenomena of presence, discontinuity and mutation is the concept of ‘metonymy’. You have written:

My thesis is, to put it somewhat paradoxically, that metonymy is a metaphor for discontinuity. Or, rather, that metonymy is a metaphor for the entwinement of continuity and discontinuity. Whereas representationalism has given us an unprecedented insight into how continuity is created, metonymy can account for humans’ inordinate ability to spring surprises on themselves. (Runia 2006a, 7)

Would you give us, in a nutshell, your theory of metonymy as the most useful tool in the philosophy of history?

Runia: Your question makes me think of the sculptor Auguste Rodin who, having accepted to make a commemorative statue for Honoré de Balzac, couldn’t decide between two options. The first was a muscled nude, a kind of wrestler, with a prominent phallus; the other featured the dressing gown in which Balzac used to write. As to the latter option: Rodin somehow acquired a specimen of Balzac’s gown, draped it around a study of the writer’s body, and succeeded in having a plaster cast made of it. Both the empty gown and the ‘wrestler’ are still on view in the Musée Rodin – and I think one would be hard pressed to envision more radically divergent materializations of Balzac than Rodin’s two options. And it is, of course, a tribute to Balzac that both were valid.

What makes Rodin’s dilemma even more poignant is that his two options coincide with the distinction between metaphor and metonymy. The nude wrestler-like body clearly has the this-is-like

-that structure that is the hallmark of all metaphors: it states that Balzac is *like* an extremely potent wrestler. And typically, by comparing the one to the other Rodin's metaphorical statue would have generated 'meaning': it is a proposal for how to interpret Balzac. The empty dressing gown on the other hand is as metonymical as metonymy can be. Metonymy after all is the substitution of something for something else. With my students I always used the example of somebody saying 'That's me' when his/her cell phone is ringing. The 'me' in that statement is a substitute for the phone.

Rodin's empty coat is a substitute for Balzac – in much the same way as our phone may be the substitute for us. It does not suggest any 'meaning' – that is to say: it offers no clue for how to make sense of Balzac – and instead it presents (by the sheer fact of its emptiness) an absence that paradoxically stresses the reality of Balzac's existence. I think it's a pity that Rodin didn't dare to present this empty gown as the final version of the statue. Pressed by the Société des Gens de Lettres (that had commissioned the memorial) he added Balzac's head to the dressing gown, and so created the illusion that the gown was, after all, filled with a body (and, I cannot but think, a huge erection). Rodin thus forfeited the chance to make a veritable metonymical monument for this quintessentially metonymical writer – and saddled us with a statue that hovers uncomfortably between metaphorical signification and metonymical matter-of-factness.

The empty gown would have embodied the incomprehensible discontinuity between the vibrant, energetic liveliness of Balzac and the fact that death had ended this life 'just like that'. The amazing thing is, however, that in as far as it embodies this discontinuity, the metonymy of the empty gown acquires the qualities of a metaphor: it shows what discontinuity 'is like'. The empty coat not just *juxtaposes* the incredible fullness of Balzac's life with the equally incredible emptiness it left behind, but also *connects* these two 'spheres'. And because connections by definition establish a kind of continuity, I felt justified to say, as you quote me in your question 'that metonymy is a metaphor for the entwinement of continuity and discontinuity'.

In order to explain why I consider metonymy the quintessentially *historical* trope – more so than the darling trope of representationalism: metaphor – I have to say something about the fact that a plaster cast of a dressing gown is quite a gross metonymy compared to the metonymies we are immersed in without us even noticing it. The sea of metonymies in which we move around

consists of *names*. Names – for things, people and phenomena – are the primordial metonymies. They definitely don't confer meaning but just substitute a combination of letters (something, that is, derived from the world of language) for something that exists in the real world. All the things I said about Rodin's empty gown hold true for names as well: a name highlights the absence for which it stands, but also connects material reality with the symbolic order. Whereas Richard Rorty famously said that 'language goes all the way down', I would maintain that metonymic names are the interfaces between naked reality and the world of language. A name is a fistula between existence and culture.

Names happen to be the raw material of historians. Every description of a historical event is replete with names. Whatever a historian wants to depict – be it the struggle between the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire, the Dreyfus Affair or the Battle of the Coral Sea – he must rely on names. You simply cannot describe the Battle of the Coral Sea without using metonymies as 'the Americans', 'the Japanese', 'Isoroku Yamamoto', 'Chester Nimitz', the 'Shōkaku' and the 'Yorktown'. In each and every name the historian uses, the past is absently present. Historians use these building blocks without realizing their metonymical structure and by doing so allow historical reality to get on board of their texts unnoticed. It is – as I explained in *Moved by the Past* – a bit like what Roland Barthes wrote about the photo of André Kertész of the gypsy violinist in the Hungarian countryside. The violinist that Kertész studiously photographed doesn't really move Barthes, but the past 'pierces him like an arrow' when he notices the dirt road that accidentally 'got on board' of Kertész's photo (Barthes 1981, 26).

I believe that the fact that names are metonymies explains why simply reciting names – as is done at modern commemorations – evokes reactions that are much more visceral than our response to metaphors. Whereas a metaphor may *delight* us, a metonymy can *touch* or *move* us. I don't want to suggest that the one response is better than the other; my point is that they are qualitatively different – and that its vertical, diachronic aspect makes metonymy the quintessential *historical* trope.

Tamm: Let me turn now briefly to some of your sources of inspiration. There is one intellectual figure that is constantly present in your essays, next to German authors like Goethe and Schiller or Musil and Sebald, namely the Neapolitan thinker Giambattista Vico. Could you explain what makes 'the philosophy of the

incomparable Giambattista Vico' (Runia 2007, 316) so important for you, and how would you summarize his influence on your thinking?

Runia: By bringing up Vico, you enable me to take on the part of your previous question I postponed to answer: the question of how metonymy can account for our ability to surprise ourselves. Ever since Jules Michelet rediscovered him in the beginning of the nineteenth century, Vico's extraordinary sensitivity for how we may surprise ourselves, that is, his sensitivity for the mechanics of creativity, has enticed quite a few writers. For me, Vico's theory of creativity has the added attraction that it is thoroughly historical. He states, in effect, as I show in the eponymous chapter in *Moved by the Past*, that true creativity, in which we surprise ourselves with what we didn't know we were capable of, is a matter of 'inventing the new from the old' (Runia 2014, 144–157).

This does not mean, however, that Vico conceives of creativity as just pouring old wine into new bottles. On the contrary, Vico makes a sharp distinction between what he calls *imaginatio* and *inventio*. He is quite disparaging about *imaginatio*: it is nothing more than a kind of mental gymnastics in which we strain our frame of reference to have it perform another trick. Thus, though *imaginatio* certainly can produce newness, this newness is essentially 'more of the same'. *Inventio* on the other hand is a *transcending* of our frame of reference. It is a weird process, a process that always involves a degree of dissociation. When we're really inventive, we are turned into spectators that are excitedly, but also a bit apprehensively, looking at what we ourselves turn out to be doing. In *inventio*, we transgress the bounds of what we have come to regard as our identity in such a way that we invalidate that identity and end up in something we didn't envisage beforehand. True invention therefore produces what the Germans call *Selbsthervorbringung* and what in biology is called *autopoiesis*.

One of the things I like about Vico is that he doesn't stop there, but points to a curious complication. *Inventio*, he says, is by definition the victim of its own success – which may be the reason that we tend to forget that it exists at all. A successful invention creates a new frame of reference – but, from that new frame of reference, the original invention looks like just another act of *imaginatio*. That's how we read the Homeric poems, Cervantes and James Joyce; that's how we appreciate the French Revolution and the introduction of the Euro: because they have created the frames of references from which we approach them, they look like

instances of imagination. Vico's 'dialectic of invention' illuminates very nicely some of the key features of historical discontinuities: they are born in a state of dissociation; they have the form of a tunnel from which we emerge as other people than we were when we entered it; and afterwards we can't really imagine how unimaginable they were before they came about.

But then, after having demonstrated that it is impossible to really know the frames of reference from which we invented the new, Vico makes another move – and a veritable *salto mortale* it is. This move is that Vico maintains that – though theoretically it is impossible to get access to previous frames of reference – in practice it can be done quite well. He claims that the history of a culture is stored not in documents and artefacts (let alone archives!) but in the living presences he calls 'institutions'. By institutions he had in mind the way in which a culture structures its legal system, the machinery of its government, the conventions and traditions people use in their interactions with one another and (most importantly) its language. Vico thus embodies a radical position that to me is very alluring. Or rather: he radicalizes the two poles of the dilemma and states that they are both valid: he declares, in effect, that the past is *both* more *unknowable* than historians assume *and* more *knowable* than they may be able to bear. More unknowable because hindsight obliterates the discontinuities that went into the making of the present; more knowable because all these discontinuities are stored in the living institutions that constitute the biotope we live in.

If it is indeed true, as Vico claims, that our pasts are stored in our institutions, the question becomes one of how to extract these pasts from the present we live in. Vico looked for an answer in the discipline in which he earned a living: rhetorics. He had the brilliant idea to conceive of these institutions as the 'places' in the branch of rhetoric that ever since Aristotle was called 'topics'. The word topics derives from the *topoi* (literally 'places') that indicated all the rhetorical possibilities that could be used to put something in the mind of an audience. A politician proposing a line of action would look for the *topoi* that could best make the case for his proposal; a lawyer defending a client would use the particular *topoi* that made the most of his client's position. A *topos* is a 'place' – a specific 'region' of what in the course of time was charted by language. How effective a 'place' is in putting something in the mind of an audience depends on the extent to which it is not just available to the speaker but to the audience as well, on the extent, that is, to which the place is a 'commonplace'.

I would like to stress here that, for Vico, topics (as a praxis) is the antithesis of Cartesian criticism. Topics is not meant to cut things down to size but has the function of (as Vico himself says) ‘making minds inventive’ (Vico 1994, 498). Just think of a lawyer who defends someone accused of a murder: in order to exonerate his client, and invent a new and convincing story of what might have happened at the crime scene, the lawyer has to leave no stone unturned. In case you haven’t noticed, at this point we really have come full circle. Vico’s insistence that topics makes the mind inventive is the final piece of the astonishing arc he constructs in his *Scienza Nuova*. Remember, first, that Vico had concluded that our pasts are stored in our institutions. Realize, second, that Vico conceived of these living institutions as *topoi*. If you combine these two premises with his saying that the praxis of making the most of this *topoi* ‘makes minds inventive’, you arrive at what is the crux of Vico’s philosophy of history: that we can gain access to the past by means of the same device as the one by which the past was made. As I said in *Moved by the Past*:

Topics thus is instrumental *both* in how we have become what we are *and* in our ability to *fathom* how we have become what we are. By “making minds inventive”, topics is the motor of history as well as the vehicle of understanding. (Runia 2014, 150)⁵

I still think this is an awesome, or even sublime, vision. Vico’s *Scienza Nuova* may be completely unreadable but hidden in its baroque form lies the most elegant, poetic, non-reductive and comprehensive account of human metamorphosis that I know of. My own theorizing about ‘presence’ is nothing more than an attempt to connect Vico’s topics with my ideas about the metonymical structure of historical knowledge. In the chapter ‘Presence’ in *Moved by the Past*, I show that Vico’s ‘places’ can very well be conceived of as metonymies. And because, as I have just explained, places are how Vico conceives of institutions, and because, as I have also indicated, these institutions constitute the world we live in, my theory about presence can be regarded as a proposal to interpret our world as a surface consisting of innumerable metonymical ‘spots of time’. These spots of time may look perfectly inconspicuous, but they contain – in much the same way as our genome contains our complete evolutionary ancestry – all the pasts that went into their making.

Tamm: Among present-day thinkers, it seems to me that you are the closest to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, even if you do not refer to him

very often. He was one the first to introduce the concept of 'presence' in the contemporary theoretical discussions (his 'one big idea', as he has described this recently – Gumbrecht 2014, ix) and has advocated to move beyond hermeneutics and to return to 'reality' and 'direct experience' (Gumbrecht 1997, 423). Would you explain briefly your relation to Gumbrecht's work and in what respect your notion of 'presence' differs from that of Gumbrecht?

Runia: Hans Ulrich – 'Sepp' – is definitely one of the most lively and inspiring people I know. Our contact was effectuated by his Stanford colleague Ewa Domanska. She had asked me to send her my presence essay as soon as I finished it, and, when I did, she wrote me that Sepp had just written about presence too. So, I sent him my (as yet unpublished) essay, read his book and invited him to explore our shared interest in what was apparently a very timely issue in the form of a conference. He reacted enthusiastically but said he could only come if I could arrange travel for him from Wolfsburg (where he had a meeting with the Volkswagen Foundation) to Groningen and a hotel room with a bath (because, as he said, he could only think in a bath). The hotel room was hardly a problem, but to get him to Groningen I had to take the unprecedented step of asking the rector of Groningen University to lend us his corporate limousine to drive him from Wolfsburg – and, miraculously, the rector agreed. This was the celebrated Presence conference – surely one of the most successful conferences I have attended, not just because *History and Theory* agreed to publish our lectures, but most of all because the conference exuded an inspiring sense of urgency and because there was an atmosphere of generous broad-mindedness.⁶

For me, Gumbrecht exemplifies something that is very rare: an unscholastic scholar, a professor who not just tends his academic garden, but is always focused on the real world and has an uncanny ability to sense cultural phenomena *directly*. For a professor in literature this is rather odd – after all, many of his colleagues just trade in words – but it explains why academics are every so often awestruck by his 'originality'. I use quotation marks because for Sepp this 'originality' is nothing more than an epiphenomenon of his radical, 'tantric' open-mindedness for life, for reality, for beauty, for 'moments of intensity', for rapture. For this philosophically astute omnivore, erudition is the medium, not the message. In fact, he is an artist of sorts⁷ – but whereas the material of the painter is paint and that of the sculptor clay,

Sepp's material is his immense knowledge of the western cultural tradition. The fact that he expresses his direct vision by using his erudition as the 'clay' to work in can be quite confusing for his more traditional colleagues. For Sepp, his interpretations of the canon are incidental to their usefulness in enabling him to express what he 'sees'. In *Production of Presence*, he gives this method a final turn of the screw: he turns it upon itself and uses his knowledge of hermeneutics as the material from which he 'sculpts' his perception of what his anti-hermeneutic method looks like.

His scepticism about hermeneutics is one of the many things we have in common, but it is, I guess, more illuminating to answer your question and to sketch in what respect our notions of presence differ. I think these differences boil down to just one: the fact that for Sepp presence is about *immediacy*, whereas for me it is about *hiding in plain sight*. I think we both subscribe to the Heideggerian notion that "'Being" refers to the things of the world before they become part of a culture' (Gumbrecht 2004, 70) – and we both feel that exclusive attention to the 'things of the world as they are taken up *in* culture' invalidates the way we experience life. I think we would also agree that hermeneutics and metaphysics – however 'deep' they 'penetrate' – by definition stay within the bounds of 'culture' and can never capture 'being'. One of my favourite quotations is from Friedrich Schlegel: 'one cannot say *that* something is, without saying *what* it is.' For me, and I think for Sepp too, Schlegel's remark illuminates the view that as soon as we appropriate an object or a phenomenon hermeneutically (Schlegel's 'what' refers to interpretation) the brute fact of its being (Schlegel's 'that') jumps out the window. But Sepp finds the 'being' that always escapes our representations in unmediated directness, intensity and corporeality, whereas I situate 'presence' on the treacherous surface of the world in which we move.

Tamm: In 2014, your main essays in the field of the philosophy of history, written over the last 10 years, were adapted for and published in the volume *Moved by the Past: Discontinuity and Historical Mutation*. I agree with your judgement that these nine essays form a truly coherent unity. This reminds me of what another thinker of presence, French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, has said about the nature of a collection of essays:

A collection is not a pure aggregation of different pieces. It builds a whole, if not a system (but, why not?), at least a coordination of themes. What perhaps is more, it makes sensible an insistence, if

not an obsession (but, why not?), in a certain way of thinking.
(Nancy 1993, ix)

What is your insistence or obsession in this book, seen from a certain distance by now? Or more generally, what have you learnt from compiling the book, and also, from its reception so far?

Runia: Retrospectively, *Moved by the Past* is a chronicle of a transition – but both the trajectory that leads up to the book and its aftermath are, in the book, shrouded in darkness. It is, at least in English, the short visible part of the arc of a comet or the waterfall that connects and divides two biotopes. *Moved by the Past* records how my interest in how we *come to terms* with trauma metamorphosed into an interest in how we cannot resist *creating* the sublime historical events that are – as soon as they are committed – experienced as trauma. It is worth stressing: the dizzying attraction of the new and the horrifying realization of what we have done is just the up- and downside of the same phenomenon. In between lies the event. The book was born because I felt an obligation to write a neat, ‘continuous’ monograph about discontinuity – but, fortunately, my resistance to do so turned out to be bigger than my academic superego. So, on consideration, the structure of *Moved by the Past* is a creative emergency jump – with the result that the book is not just *about* discontinuity, but that its structure is true to its thesis and its argument more comprehensive (and more radical) than the sum of its parts.

I’m at a loss for how to answer your question of what I ‘learned’ from the book or its reception. I can only say that all the books I have written make me feel just a little bit guilty: it’s not just that I didn’t really nurse them – as a more responsible parent would have done – I actually wanted to get rid of them. When I’m invited to give a lecture about one of my books, I always have to suppress the protest ‘but I’ve already said it!’ – a protest that is amplified by my conviction that the sole criterion of a good piece is that when you reread it you cannot imagine that you wrote it yourself. In terms of my own theory: when it comes to writing I am compulsively driven to *inventio* and can only put something on paper when I can play the game of *Selbsthervorbringung*. That’s why I had such an immense resistance against this interview. But, of course, as soon as you start to try to be a match for your subject, you cannot help kindling inventiveness.

Tamm: Your current project consists of writing a new book, preliminary titled *Red Queen History* (after the evolutionary hypothesis

named for the Lewis Carroll figure). As I understand, you are arguing that we should apprehend our cultural evolution as a succession of ever new ways to make life more exacting, as a matter of 'selectiveness', in evolutionary scientific terms, rather than a matter of 'variation'.⁸ Would you give us a more precise idea about your aims with this project?

Runia: The starting point of my Red Queen project is an observation that is as down to earth as it is puzzling: why does life never get easier? Why is what we gain by adopting smartphones, search-engines, route planners and coffee makers that sync to the alarm of our phones outweighed by the fact that we keep finding ways to make life more demanding? The usual answer is that making life *more* demanding is the adverse or perverse effect of making it *less* demanding. That the price for not having to buy stamps and bring letters to a mailbox is the obligation to answer our emails immediately. My Red Queen thesis states that the fact that we succeed in keeping life demanding is *not* the reverse side of 'progress' but important in its own right, that it is an ingredient that is at least as vital for the form as well as the development of our culture as the positive attainments we prefer to showcase as our cultural heritage.

In this new book, I will make use of what in biology is called the Red Queen effect. Leigh Van Valen and, later, Matt Ridley have pointed to the fact that because environments are not stable, species have to adapt continuously in order to survive. But the faster species 'run', the more the world moves with them and the less they make any 'real' progress – just like Alice (in Wonderland) ends up, after running as fast as she could, in the very same spot she started from. Whereupon the Red Queen says: 'here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.' It occurred to me that this Red Queen effect fitted in surprisingly well with my thoughts about 'stress-induced mutation'. In one of my previous answers, I already pointed out that evolutionary scientists regard evolution as the result of the interaction between, on the one hand, the creation of 'variation' (the emergence of new heritable properties) and, on the other, what Darwin called the 'hostile forces of nature' (the selective pressure of the environment). I also said that you might well argue that humans have learned to domesticate selectiveness by bringing about 'mutation-inducing' catastrophes by themselves.

For a long time, I identified these catastrophes with (discontinuous) historical events. This Red Queen project takes, however, a further step and hypothesizes that there is an even more

fundamental way in which we, as a species, are ‘our own best enemy’. In this project, I call these straightjackets ‘modes of self-regulation’. The concept has an obvious affinity with what Clifford Geertz has called ‘control mechanisms’ – the mechanisms, as Geertz explains, ‘by whose agency the breadth and indeterminateness of [man’s] inherent capacities are reduced to the narrowness and specificity of his actual accomplishments’ (Geertz 1973, 45).⁹ Building on Geertz, I define modes of self-regulation as the more or less coherent sets of self-reinforcing restrictions, obligations and challenges with which we circumscribe and enable our lives.¹⁰

Self-regulation goes back to the beginning of culture – and I would like to maintain that it *is* culture. In the *Svetasvatara Upanisad*, self-regulation is treated in terms of a yoke: ‘A wise person should control the mind, just as one would a wagon yoked to unruly horses.’¹¹ There are many such ‘yokes’, such modes of self-regulation. It may well be that the earliest forms, like the obligation/ability to postpone gratification, the injunction/capacity to transcend immediacy and the possibilities and challenges arising from a more or less stable identity, have been even more important for how we became what we are than the later ones, but they have become so inextricably bound up with our humanness that they can, as far as I can see, not be studied in a way that is recognizably historical.¹² So, one could jest that, in Red Queen history, in the beginning is not the word (as in the gospel of John) nor the deed (as in Goethe’s *Faust*) but the yoke.

In case you want some examples of more ‘historical’ modes of self-regulation, just think of the archaic notion of ‘honour’ (that compelled the people that felt bound to it to act upon things that others could ignore),¹³ the willingness to submit to laws, the (fifth-century BCE) obligation to be a ‘philosopher’ and to be adept at ‘metaphysics’ (that is, to be able to inhabit the notion that reality is not to be found in appearances),¹⁴ the counter-intuitive and infinitely demanding Christian mode of self-regulation that is exemplified by the injunction ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’,¹⁵ the early modern obligation to act upon what Thomas Hobbes called the ‘desire to be foremost’ and the nineteenth-century bourgeois ethos by which you were expected to invest in yourself and to maximize the returns on that investment.

A major feature of a mode of self-regulation is that it makes life significantly more demanding for those who adhere to it (that is, it creates ‘stress’), but, precisely because of that, also ‘induces

mutations': it incites people to invent innovative and transferable skills, procedures, 'mind-sets', 'tools' and institutions (that is, the 'assets' we associate with cultural change) that help them cope with the burden they have saddled themselves with. Ironically, modes of self-regulation may bring self-reinforcing feedback loops that make life even more demanding (the adapters now may also have to adapt to the results of their own adaptations). Chances are, however, that the inventions induced by the increased selectiveness (as well as the fact that these inventions come to change the [cultural] environment) eventually give the adapters an edge over their neighbours.¹⁶ If its adaptiveness is so contagious as to make it dominant, a mode of self-regulation may come to characterize a clan, a society, a culture or a civilization. In that case it becomes that particular component of the environment that exerts and embodies its selective pressure – it becomes a 'regime of selectiveness' (see Runia 2014, 167–168, 198–201), a code with which you have to comply in order to get along and to lead a life that is considered worthwhile under that regime.

Because I have already said way too much about my Red Queen project, I will be very succinct about my aims. The first is to give a comprehensive account of how new modes of self-regulation *emerge*. I will take up the notion of dissociative decision-making that I wrote about earlier to show how discontinuous change has the form of a 'ratcheted' process in which we flee forward by fleeing from one accomplished fact to another. The second aim is to sketch the careers of modes of self-regulation. I will show that the trajectories of these careers are functions, in the first place, of the quantity and the adaptive potential of the mutations they engender and, second, of how they perform in comparison with older and, eventually, newer modes of self-regulation. The third and most ambitious aim is an attempt to historicize the way we embark on the new. I will explore to what extent the way new modes of self-regulation are created changes over time – to what extent, that is, the way we provide for selectiveness *itself* evolves. Jablonka and Lamb (2005, 101) say: 'It would be very strange [...] to believe that everything in the living world is the product of evolution except one thing – the process of generating new variation.' I want, in short, to clarify how the uncanny – but in the long run extremely effective – adeptness to be our own best enemy does *itself* evolve.

Notes

1. I notice that in the footnote of one of your articles, you point out that your ‘approach may be called psychohistorical in Lucien Febvre’s sense that in order to understand history one should acquaint oneself with the *outillage mental* of its subjects’ (Runia 2010a, 4, fn, 6).
2. Compare this to another definition: ‘subconscious persistence of an unacknowledged past can be called “presence” – which I like to define as “the unrepresented way the past is present in the here and now”’ (Runia 2010c, 232).
3. I say ‘modern’ because for Freud himself countertransference was still entirely negative – not a source of information, but something to avoid.
4. Cf. Runia (2010b): ‘If there is one single issue that deserves to shape the discussions about the relation of history and theory in the upcoming years it is, I think, how to circumvent the blind spot that makes it so difficult to say sensible things about how, in history as well as in historiography, the new – the exhilarating, frightening, sinful, sublimely new – comes about.’
5. Not the least of Vico’s many qualities is that he makes it abundantly clear that in order to understand an author you shouldn’t just follow his line of argument but have to really *reinvent* him – as I tried to do in answering this question.
6. The conference titled ‘Presence’ took place at the University of Groningen on 1–2 December 2005 and its proceedings were published in *History and Theory* 45 (3), 2006.
7. In *Production of Presence* he in fact writes about ‘how close to actual artistic practice some of our academic activities can be’ (Gumbrecht 2004, 96).
8. I’m basing this on the description of the lecture, given under the same title at the Centre for the Humanities, University of California, Berkeley, on 17 November 2014. See <http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/blog/red-queen-history> (accessed on 30 November 2018).
9. Or, as he says elsewhere, the ‘plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what the computer engineer call “programs”) – for the governing of behavior’ (Geertz 1973, 44).
10. I do not define these in terms of morality: morality is just the upper stratum of the structure that regulates and prescribes life.
11. *Śvetāśvatara Upanisad* II: 9, in *Upanisads* (1996, 253–256). The various forms of yoga (the name has the same root as yoke) all are first and foremost *disciplines*.
12. They are, in fact, the subject of evolutionary psychology. Fathoming these early stages was, of course, Giambattista Vico’s grand project in the *Scienza Nuova*.
13. See, for example, Martin (1989) and Rose (1992).
14. This is what has been called ‘the axial transformation’. See, for example, Bellah (2011).
15. See, for example, Fredriksen (2012).

16. This doesn't mean however that increased competitiveness is a sufficient, or even necessary, *motivation* for 'conversion' to a mode of self-regulation. In fact, I hypothesize that this is the exception rather than the rule.

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