

HISTORY AS INVENTION: EDMUNDO O'GORMAN'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

AINHOA SUÁREZ GÓMEZ AND MARIANA IMAZ*

History is like love. It is a hallucination in which a person attributes virtues to someone, who, perhaps, does not even possess them.

—Edmundo O'Gorman

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this article is twofold. On the one hand, we seek to provide an analysis of the theoretical and philosophical work of O'Gorman regarding history. A lot of work has been done to understand the value of O'Gorman's contribution to decolonial studies and how his notion of *invention* was a breakthrough in the field. Now, we seek to understand how the very notion of *invention*, read as an epistemological category, was transversal to his work and allowed him to not only rethink the status of America's being, but the status of historical knowledge. On the other hand, we aim to put O'Gorman's contributions to the field of philosophy of history on the map. Many of his questions, reflections, and interests can contribute to historical and contemporary discussions in the field, particularly those that have to do with realism, the nature of historical facts, and the role that imagination and narrative play in historiography.

RESUMEN: El propósito de este ensayo es doble. Por un lado, buscamos ofrecer un análisis de la obra teórica y filosófica de Edmundo O'Gorman en torno a la historia. Hasta hoy, se ha tratado de comprender el valor de la contribución de O'Gorman a los estudios descoloniales y cómo su noción de «invención» supuso un avance decisivo en el campo. Ahora, pretendemos entender cómo esa misma noción de invención—interpretada como categoría epistemológica—atravesó toda su obra y le permitió replantear no solo el estatuto del ser de América, sino también el del conocimiento histórico. Por otro lado, aspiramos a poner en relieve las aportaciones de O'Gorman al ámbito de la filosofía de la historia. Muchas de sus interrogantes, reflexiones e intereses pueden enriquecer los debates históricos y contemporáneos de la disciplina, especialmente aquellos relacionados con el realismo, la naturaleza de los hechos históricos y el papel que desempeñan la imaginación y la narrativa en la historiografía.

* Dr. Suárez Gómez teaches at UNAM. Email: ainhoasuarezgomez@gmail.com; Dr. Imaz is Program Manager for Humanities Washington. Email: imazmariana@gmail.com

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1. INTRODUCTION

Edmundo O’Gorman (1906-1995) was a Mexican historian and philosopher whose work ranges from meditations about the being of America, to Mexico and Creoleism, the Virgin of Guadalupe, contributions to the theory of history, to impeccable translations of English-speaking historians and philosophers such as Robin George Collingwood (Matute, 1997). Much attention has been given to his idea of the “invention of America” and how that contributed to the emergence of decolonial studies. For example, Walter Mignolo (2005) referred to his work as a “turning point” in understanding how European modernity heavily influenced the understanding of the inhabitants, the lands, and power relations that emerged since Columbus set foot in what is now called America. José Rabasa (1993), inspired by O’Gorman’s notion of “invention,” explicitly talks about neocolonialism and Eurocentrism in the literary and epistolary formation of the idea of “The New World”. In 2012, Rabasa also retrieves three fundamental ideas—Intention, Invention, and Reduction to Absurdity— from O’Gorman’s work to understand the emergence of America in European consciousness. Recently, Sánchez Prado (2023) has taken O’Gorman’s ideas to think through a process of decolonization, not just in the historiographic field, but in philosophy as well.

As mentioned above, another important contribution of O’Gorman’s work was in the field of theory and philosophy of history. Although there are Latin American authors, especially Mexican thinkers (Matute, Fernández Castro, Suárez Gómez, Díaz Maldonado, Hernández López), who have paid special attention to this area of his writings, it has nonetheless been neglected in American and Anglo-Saxon Academia. This is partly because most of O’Gorman’s work has not been translated into English, particularly his contributions to this field. Although a lot of work needs to be put into translation, this article starts with a more humble goal, which is to shine a light on O’Gorman’s contributions in the field of philosophy of history and recognize how his reflections align him with classic authors—such as Benedetto Croce, R.G Collingwood, Arthur Danto, Louis Mink, Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit, etc.— that changed the ways we think about history and the historical endeavor. In this sense, O’Gorman continues a tradition that started with nineteenth-century historicism, but he also pioneers many of the arguments against historical realism. Most of his writings were published in the 40s and 50s, preceding classical texts such as Mink’s “The Autonomy of Historical Understanding” (1966), Danto’s 1962 “Narrative Sentences” or White’s *Metahistory* (1973). O’Gorman’s criticisms of positivism and realism as well as his idea of invention pushed, in many ways, how history is thought about and taught in history departments across Mexico and Latin America.

Thus, the purpose of this article is twofold. On the one hand, we seek to provide an analysis of the theoretical and philosophical work of O’Gorman regarding history. As previously mentioned, a lot of work has been done to understand the value of O’Gorman’s contribution to decolonial studies and how his notion of *invention* was a breakthrough in the field. Now, we seek to understand how the very notion of *invention*, read as an epistemological category, was transversal to his work and allowed him to not only rethink the status of America’s being, but the status of historical knowledge. On the other hand, we aim to put O’Gorman’s contributions to the field of philosophy of history on the map. Many of his questions, reflections, and interests can contribute to historical and contemporary discussions in the field, particularly those that have to do with realism, the nature of historical facts, and the role that imagination and narrative play in historiography.

Alongside his research on the history of America, in 1945 O’Gorman produced a series of theoretical texts that present both a sharp critique against positivist historiography developed in Mexico at the time and a new program for an alternative way of writing and understanding history. His critique, which intertwines philosophical, theoretical, and methodological considerations, begins by refuting historiography’s eagerness to imitate the model of impartial pretensions of the empirical sciences and its derived concepts of past, truth, and knowledge. Of the former, O’Gorman says that it has been thought of in the same terms that physicists think of their objects of study, i.e., as objects composed of a given nature. This understanding of the past produced a type of historiography capable of adding erudite details to the descriptions of past events without offering what he calls “genuine knowledge”. As he states in an article published in 1945, it is “pure documentarianism disguised as history”¹ (1945:180).

Against this way of thinking about history, O’Gorman turns to historicism. The category refers to an eclectic movement nourished by phenomenological, hermeneutic, and existential reflections that started in Europe, which allowed for an innovative dialogue between philosophy and history (Matute, 2002: 32). O’Gorman’s interpretation of historicism pivots on the defense of historicity as a fundamental characteristic of human existence. A defense that yields two essential premises: 1. if human beings are first and foremost historical entities, then everything they create shares the same nature; and 2. by accepting the philosophical principle of historicity, historiography takes the role of gathering and interpreting how that historical human condition has been understood over time. O’Gorman links these two premises as follows: “History should be understood no longer as an event that “happens” to man and which, just as it happened to him, might not have happened to him, a mere contingency and accident that in no way

¹ All of O’Gorman’s quotes were translated by the authors of this article.

affects him, but as something that constitutes him in his spiritual being; history, therefore, is a modality of what we call life (1977:12).² Under this lens, history becomes a “pragmatic-vital” program, whose main aim was to enable us to “recognize ourselves in the past and to assume the intimate unity of our life with history” (1947:183).

2. QUESTIONING REALISM

As mentioned in the introduction of this article, an important concept that crossed O’Gorman’s work was that of invention. When talking about the so-called discovery of America, O’Gorman argued that America could not refer to a piece of land that was suddenly unveiled in 1492 by Christopher Columbus. Rather, the name America referred to a collection of different ideas that had been held about the land, its inhabitants, its history and its relationship with the rest of the cosmos over the years. America’s “being” was thus not discovered but constructed or, better yet, *invented* throughout time. In his words:

America did not make its appearance in culture and history as the result of the sudden revelation of a discovery that would have exhibited suddenly a supposed being mysteriously lodged, since always and forever, in the lands that Columbus found, but as the result of a complex ideological process that ended, through a series of attempts and hypotheses, by granting them a peculiar and proper sense: that of being the “fourth part” of the world”. (1977: 135)

The main philosophical commitment behind this insightful thesis is that discovering means finding something that is already made or formed and simply revealing its nature. On the contrary, to invent something is to “give it a being.” This invention framework was latent in his prior philosophical work regarding history. Let us now look at how this idea was present and how it played a key role in his understanding of historical knowledge.

A constant theme throughout O’Gorman’s philosophical and theoretical work on history was the critique of what he called “the traditional view of history”, also referred to as realism. He explained it in the following terms: “In short, for this

² *La invención de América. El universalismo de la cultura de Occidente* (*The Invention of America. The Universalism of Western Culture*), was initially published in Spanish in 1958. An expanded English edition, titled *The Invention of America. An Inquiry on the Historical Nature of the New World and The Meaning of its History*, was released by Indiana University Press in 1961. This version, based on a series of lectures dictated at Indiana University between November and December 1958, contains several additions including a genealogy of the idea of the discovery of America, the cultural context in which the idea was conceived, as well as a “final speculation” on America’s destiny in world history. In 1977 O’Gorman translated the expanded English edition back into Spanish and published it through Fondo de Cultura Económica. This is the edition used in this article. All of O’Gorman’s quotes were translated by the authors of this article.

way of thinking there is no essential difference between knowing the human past and knowing any other reality. It is, therefore, a school that likes to conceive itself as realistic, although, of course, it is clear to no one that in such an equivocal concept lies the whole problem of the past.” (2007:14) It is important to pay attention to his remarks because as previously mentioned, very early on (40’s and 50’s) he made certain claims that are still being discussed in the philosophy of history today. In his writings, O’Gorman criticized the dream of producing a history that could reach an impartial truth. Moreover, his critical work was accompanied by a proposal of what he calls “a revolutionary historical consciousness”, meaning a new way to think of the historical endeavor. In what follows we present both the critical arguments and his novel approach to historiography.

In 1991, O’Gorman presented “Fantasmas en la narrativa historiográfica” (Ghosts in historical narratives) after receiving his *honoris causa* at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico. In this later piece, he brings together a lot of what he claimed in past texts, particularly in one of his first theoretical essays written in 1945 “Consideraciones sobre la verdad en la historia” (Considerations on Truth in History); but in his Ph.D. dissertation *Crisis y porvenir de la ciencia histórica* (*Crisis and Prospect of the Historical Science*) from 1947; and in “La vida como historia” (Life as history) from 1956. In 1991, O’Gorman claimed that three ghosts still haunted the historical discipline: the ghost of essentialism, the ghost of causality, and the ghost that is untrusty of the historical imagination. In the following section, we unpack the first two of these ghosts to then move to his understanding of imagination and narrative in the historical discipline. We argue that the first two respond to his critical project and the third to his positive account of history.

3. CRITIQUE TO ESSENTIALISM

When O’Gorman talks about essentialism, he refers to a philosophy that commits to the belief that things, subjects, territories, historical data, etc., have an undisturbed or *essential nature* that remains the same throughout time. O’Gorman’s famous thesis that America was invented takes the rejection of essentialism to heart. As a matter of fact, throughout *Crisis y porvenir de la ciencia histórica* O’Gorman argues that America functions simply as a case study. What matters to him is to demonstrate philosophically that every historical entity is not something given but constructed. In this sense, O’Gorman takes to heart José Ortega y Gasset’s famous statement—that humans do not have nature, they have history— but applies it to a historiographic problem, a terrain that the Spaniard philosopher never reached.

In the case of America, what is being rejected is that America had an essence before Columbus encountered it. As Susana Nuccetelli (2020:16) rightly points out, O’Gorman engages critically with the notion of Columbus’s *discovery*, not to pass the baton to someone else or to dismantle its ethnocentric consequences,

but to critically engage with the notion of America itself, as a formed and consolidated territory that had an identity prior to Columbus's voyage.³ What the Mexican historian seriously takes as a problem is that the term America depends deeply on our conceptual and analytic framework. In other words, America is an idea that was constructed through time, its "nature" is historical, and as such it has no essence, rather, echoing the words of Ortega y Gasset, it has a history. This is why O'Gorman chooses the thesis of invention: the idea of America and its inhabitants formed throughout time and relied on previous conceptions and frameworks to construct what it is today.

This argument against essentialism is not something that he used exclusively for his *Invention of America* thesis. As previously stated, he took essentialism to be a ghost in the historical discipline.⁴ Part of the problem with this uncomfortable tenet is that it makes us think that the past is something there to be *discovered*,

³ Decolonial theory has taken up O'Gorman's work as a crucial reference, although it has been interpreted in different ways. In *The Idea of Latin America* (2005), Walter D'Almeida Mignolo argues that O'Gorman's concept of invention marks a pivotal moment in the discipline, revealing the Eurocentric narratives that have long obscured indigenous perspectives. O'Gorman, according to Mignolo, established the foundation for the concept of *coloniality*, understood as a system of domination that persists even after formal colonization. Through discourses of salvation, progress, and the common good, coloniality perpetuates control, abuse, and the subjugation of marginalized groups. Enrique Dussel, another prominent decolonial theorist, agrees on the significance of the invention of America, but rejects O'Gorman's description of America as an extension of Europe, arguing that such a view implies the equality of American and European peoples. As Dussel explains in *The Concealment of the Other* (1994) the relationship between Europeans and Americans was one of subordination and exploitation, rather than identity. Dussel extends O'Gorman's critique by emphasizing the *concealment* of indigenous identities, genealogies, and cosmovisions prior to 1492.

⁴ Another classic work in O'Gorman's corpus is *Mexico. El trauma de su historia* (Mexico. *The Trauma of its History*). Published in 1977, the work studies how nineteenth-century Mexican independents planned the consolidation of the nation based on the belief that they had to choose as a model to imitate between two available "Americas": the conservative one of Hispanic heritage and the liberal one of the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Each model produced a metaphysics of the nation encompassing views on its past, present, and future, together with specific political agendas. O'Gorman finds problematic the historiography that simplistically frames Mexican independent history and the formation of its national identity in terms of an unresolved conflict or "trauma" between conservatives and liberals. To challenge this he denies the assumption that both models are strictly opposing and immutable. Hence, if in *The Invention of America* he offers a non-Eurocentric reinterpretation of the history of the continent, in *Mexico. The Trauma of its History*, he denies the Manichean belief that national identity was—and still is—forged on the choice of one pre-given model over another. His concluding remarks on American history serve as a corollary to the conclusions reached in *Mexico. The Trauma of its History*: the being of historical entities, such as America or Mexico is constituted on the basis of the interpretations ascribed to them over time. These interpretations that are not an *a priori* model, program or agenda but an aggregate of contingent theories, opinions, and expectations are always changeable.

something that has a particular nature that is static, formed, and ready to be unveiled. O’Gorman puts it in the following way:

Historical entities, whatever they may be, are not what they are by virtue of a supposed essence or substance that would make them what they are. In other words, their being is not inherent to them, it is nothing more than the meaning that the historian grants them in a given circumstance or more clearly stated, in the context of the system of ideas and beliefs in which he lives. (2007[1992]:105)

In this sense, O’Gorman insists that the past has been repeatedly thought of as something with a foreign nature, independent of how we think about it. “The traditional view” has understood the past as something with an essential nature, with “a being that is inherent to it”. Interestingly, O’Gorman makes the analogy that for this traditional perspective the past is like the moon: “a reality independent of us, of our life” (2007[1945]:14), and as such we can allegedly establish a well-delimited break between *us*, the subjects of knowledge, and *that* the object to be studied. O’Gorman insists that traditionalists conceive the past and the present as ontologically different things. The past seems to be like the moon, foreign, objective, and with a particular nature. The present is more subjective, and a more or less stable space from which we embark on our mission to *discover* the past. O’Gorman makes it clear that for traditionalists there is an aspiration to get to know the totality of that foreign past-land. In this sense, O’Gorman continues, the past seems to be “the result of something that comes to man from outside, something that is intrinsically foreign to him, something, in short, heterogeneous to what he will call ‘his nature’, which, of course, is conceived as ahistorical.”(1947:230)

Furthermore, because of this fundamental ontological commitment to the nature of the past, traditionalists believe that it can be known in its totality, “since the past is an independent reality, each and every one of the facts of the past, from the most important to the smallest detail, claim the same right to be known in the total vision of historical knowledge.” (2007 [1945]:15) Thus, he argues, there is a fetishism to discover new documents and bring to light unknown data, whatever the nature of that data is. The idea here is that every little piece of information can rebuild the totality of the past. In a way, the prevailing thought is that historians just need to recover all the pieces of information (sources, archives, data) to finally complete the task of bringing the past anew. To discover the past means to complete the whole picture of it. Once all the pieces fit together the true nature of the past will reveal itself.

Another way that O’Gorman presents his criticism against essentialism is by pointing out a need to create unity, something absolute. O’Gorman argues that traditionalists have a particular problem regarding unity and plurality in history. On the one hand, they argue that the more accounts of the past, the closer we are

to truth, but on the other this recognized plurality gets immediately denied in service of a unitary vision of history where all of these accounts accumulate and produce a total view of the past. In his words, “variety was accepted only to be immediately denied, for the benefit of a goal that, by definition, would put an end to the process, paralyzing history forever.” (2007[1956]:39) This essentialist aspiration for absolute truth had important consequences for the Mexican thinker, for one, it made the historical effort a static endeavor. Think about it this way, if we reveal all there is to reveal about a particular period of the past, then why should we keep studying it? Once we have “discovered” the past, our work as historians is done, nothing more to do but to move on to a new era. This, of course, does not happen in the historical discipline. People study certain epochs and characters for years, sometimes their whole lives. Such is the absurdity O’Gorman argues, to which the ghost of essentialism leads. (2007[1992]:106)

Thus, for O’Gorman traditionalists historians that commit to a realistic picture of the past have established a regime in the historical discipline that: 1. takes the past to have a particular nature or essence that can be discovered. 2. makes the past something foreign that can be known in its totality if we only collect all the pieces to reconstruct it, and 3. denies plurality in service of a unified truth, or it invites plurality only when it serves a unitary view. Now let us move on to the second ghost, that of causality. It is no surprise that a lot of his criticisms of essentialism transpire to his challenges to causality.

4. CRITIQUE OF CAUSALITY

David Brading (1997) and Sánchez Prado (2023) recognized David Hume’s influence on Edmundo O’Gorman’s thought. In 1942 O’Gorman translated Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and in 1991 O’Gorman still refers to the Scottish philosopher and his critique of the logical relation between cause and effect in his own critique of realism. O’Gorman recalls that for Hume the “mysterious force” that links two events as cause and effect is nowhere to be found. O’Gorman takes this critique to the field of philosophy of history and points to the problematic infinite regress that this commitment entails:

Take as an example a thesis that is widely used today, according to which the discovery of a small island by Christopher Columbus on October 12, 1492, caused the “meeting of the Old and New Worlds.” Well, if this had been the case, there is no reason to stop the causal sequence at that “encounter”, since it would have to fully understand the history of America that has since happened and that which is yet to happen. And if we project the argument backward and consider that Columbus’s discovery would also have to have been caused by the effect of a previous event and so on, we would arrive - depending on whether our inclination was

mythological or scientific - either to the fall of our first parents or even some transcendental event that occurred in the age of caves, and that is to fall short, since we could go back to the moment of emergence of the amoeba sea that generated the human species. (2007 [1992]:107)

According to O’Gorman, this is a complete absurdity but one that inevitably emerges if we assume that cause and effect are unproblematically discovered during a historical investigation. To avoid this nonsense, O’Gorman continues, it is central to *create a link* between historical occurrences. Let us dig a little deeper into this idea by bringing in his 1956 text “History y Vida.” A great part of this work tries to understand the notion of a historical fact and how realists and idealists have thought of it as a self-contained entity that simply gets attached to others of the kind by some sort of invisible historical hand. The notion of historical fact becomes relevant to discuss because, for one, it reveals the problematic notion of causality and it connects to the essentialist ghost that haunts the historical discipline.

O’Gorman holds that realists have a peculiar commitment to the existence of historical facts understood as this sort of “raw material” that historians use to construct historical narratives. For realists, he argues, historical knowledge consists of a sum of facts that, once “discovered” are considered definitively known. They believe that what is “found out” simply aggregates and explains how a particular occurrence came to be (2007[1945]:18). This brings us back to the notion of causality and the idea that by simply aggregating facts causality is revealed and the effects are uncovered. Let us expand on this by using the assassination of Caesar, an example that O’Gorman himself uses, to illustrate how realists conceive the presence of causality:

Fact 1: Brutus was born in 85 B.C.

Fact 2: The Civil War starts in 45 B.C.

Fact 3: Brutus surrendered to Caesar and granted him amnesty.

Fact 4: Julius Caesar is named the eternal dictator of the Roman Empire.

Fact 5: Brutus meets with “libertarian” senators.

Fact 6: Cesar is murdered.

For realists, it seems that these occurrences are already facts themselves. It would also seem that if we simply ordered these facts, we would have a causal link that explains Caesar’s assassination. But is that possible O’Gorman asks? Is it that causality is self-contained in the facts themselves? How can causality reveal itself? Again, if causality is self-revelatory and exhausts historical explanation, where do we stop? Do we need to establish a causal link between the birth of Brutus, Caesar, and all the conspirators? How far does causality go? But even when we organize the information chronologically, causality does not seem to emerge, something needs to be done for us, the readers, to understand what the cause of the

assassination was. But even more so, is there only one cause? Also, is this list of information facts themselves? Or are they occurrences that historians select and convert into facts? O’Gorman radically questions the idea that “a cause” is something that is discovered, rather it seems that it is something that we grant with a particular intention. In the same line, he critically considers what we should understand as a fact.

To move beyond both ideas—causality as manifested and fact as discovered—the Mexican thinker argues that we need to further explore the notion of intentionality. To do so, he starts by introducing two examples of “facts”, one is a storm in a faraway land, and the other is, precisely, the assassination of Caesar. At first glance, the storm seems to be foreign to the lives and destinies of humans, we can even characterize it as a “natural fact” instead of a historical one. The assassination of Caesar, on the contrary, seems to be a “historical fact” because it affected the course and direction of Roman civilization. But O’Gorman pushes the argument and asks, what if we think about the storm in a different circumstance? Let us say, as preventing or making it possible to win a battle between two contending armies? (2007[1956]:42) O’Gorman notes that if we agree that in this case, the storm is historical because it affected the lives of human beings, then we regard an occurrence with the category of “historical” when “we tacitly assume that this event was animated by the intention of producing the effect it produced, and it is precisely this intentionality that authorizes the conceptualization of the event under the category of historical fact.” (2007 [1956]:42)

Let us unpack what O’Gorman means in this brief and rich paragraph. For an occurrence to qualify as “historical fact” it must have a particular intentionality attached to it. Thus, a storm is historical if and only if one sees the storm as a cause or consequence of “x” human action. Note that O’Gorman is extremely careful to point out where this intentionality comes from. To enrich his analysis even more, he recalls that for idealism, intentionality came from a “transcendental subject” that gave actions a particular purpose, direction, and intention. For realists, the attribution of intentionality is always made by postulating a “true” intention for the event, that is, an intention that appears to be *the* intention with which the event was truly carried out (2007 [1956]:46). For both idealism and realism, the intentionality of a fact is something external to the historian. To discover facts become a metaphysical quest where either the intention of the transcendental subject is revealed or the true intention of the historical subject is discovered. But what is fundamental to note and criticize about these views is that the capacity for inscribing intention “does not lie in those entities, but exclusively in man, depending on the need he has to make the attribution and constitutive intentionality of the fact.”(2007 [1956]:44) Thus, he claims that a “historical fact” and the intentional cause that we grant it with, will always be essentially human, but not because it “marks the course of a civilization” (assassination of Caesar) or

“it decided the result of a battle” (a storm) but because it is us, humans, that grant them with such intention! In other words, for O’Gorman, past human actions and their results can only be explained by reasons that historians give, not by causes that are intrinsic to the events themselves. In this sense, we are reminded of the three historicist principles that we discussed at the beginning of this paper. For O’Gorman a) humans are historical beings and that entails having a mutable and changing nature. Therefore, b) everything humans create is going to share that historical mutability. “Facts” are not an exception here. The intention that we apply to past occurrences is something that can change. Again, causality is not an essential quality of occurrences, it is rather an intention that gets assigned to occurrences. Finally, c) because there is no intrinsic quality to facts or even the past itself, it follows that the nature of the past is also historical, and thus always mutable.

In this sense, O’Gorman argues that facts do not respond to a metaphysical calling, they also do not reveal a self-contained causality, rather they respond to a “gnoseological requirement of intelligibility of the historical act.” (2007 [1956]:55). One cannot deny, O’Gorman argues, that there are past occurrences—he calls them the substance or vital support of historical facts—but they are not there as metaphysical prepacked entities. Rather, these “vital supports” get credited with a posteriori intentionality—that of being the cause of “x”—provided by the historian. The Mexican thinker suggests that “the assassination of Caesar”—as well as the concept of “humanity” or “rational spirit”—are “pale metaphysical entities” and as such they should not constrain us. Rather, because they respond to our own need for inscribing intention to the world, we (historians), are free to use them, modify them, or give them a different meaning (2007 [1956]:58).

In other words, for O’Gorman historical knowledge is relative because the very “raw material” of history, meaning “historical facts”, is dependent on the historian. In this sense, when an event is coined as historical, “its meaning as such is not beyond us; we grant it with that quality, and thus with that being.” (2007[1956]:47) Indeed, O’Gorman continues, attributing meaning is a need of the *subject* and not a demand of the *object*. He insists that what is at play here is a hermeneutic operation, not one that reinstates an original meaning, but one that responds to the needs of the historian. (2007[1956]:45) In the end and taking the argument even further, O’Gorman holds that there are no proofs in history: “There are only conditions that interpretation must face” but these conditions can be very different, and they can respond to very different intentions. This is why, he explains, the same set of documents can produce contrary interpretations. Of course, both must explain in some way the existence and content of that view, they must justify it, but the “original proof” is not something set and done, it is just a condition that invites or sparks an interpretation. Thus, because historical

facts are not self-contained entities but only constructions that allow historians to justify and give an account of a particular view of the past, we must agree that historical knowledge is forever changing, this is why O’Gorman argues that history is not an “accumulative science” and part of its essence is constant renewal (2007[1956]:47). He concludes that historiographic knowledge is a way of adapting the past to the demands of the present, “that is, an operation that consists of putting the past (conceived under the species of historical fact) at the service of life.” (2007[1956]:56)

In the end, for O’Gorman, we cannot know the totality of the past not only because the nature of the information changes depending on the attribution of intention, but also because there is no totality to discover in the first place. Just as America was an idea that acquired meaning over time, a historical fact is also an idea (an abstraction) that is constructed and acquires full meaning when placed within a story. In this sense, a fact is not self-revelatory, it only acquires significance and relevance when a narrative accompanies and places that fact as a beginning, a middle, an end, or the cause or consequence of something. In this sense, for the Mexican thinker, the historical method “will not be the method of the simple accumulation of what is ‘found out,’ but it will be the *narrative method*, the only one truly capable of giving an account of human life, of our life, our true reality.” (our emphasis, 1945:18) The attribution of intentionality and the construction of a narrative is not something to be discovered, it is something that is constructed and crafted and, in this sense, it becomes an invention. Now let us investigate the role played by imagination in this way of conceiving historical inquiry and writing.

5. THE LACK OF IMAGINATION

O’Gorman identifies a third ghost haunting historiography: the ghost that is mistrustful of the historical imagination. Born of the idea that the past can be found, unveiled, and unequivocally described in historical discourse, this ghost, O’Gorman tells us, is simply illusory.

We must agree that not all events leave tangible remnants. It is such an obvious idea that it seems absurd to even raise it. For even in the hypothetical cases where such a thing can be dreamt up, there are always gaps to be filled, relationships to be suggested, hypothetical links to be proposed. History is more than a discipline that only accumulates, captures, and audits data. With a touch of poetic license, its essence lies in the alchemical transformation of chronicles into narratives. But for this idea to be credible or even thinkable as a possibility, an ontological gap is necessary, which realism does not realize because it defends that the existing reality transcends all articulation of the subject. O’Gorman, on the other hand, from his historicist position, not only places the weight on the

subject and his ways of knowing, rather than on the object, but does so by giving the imagination a leading role:

We must note, then, that by sticking to the information used, however exhaustive it may seem, leaves in the shadows areas of events that can only be illuminated by the imagination, that *quasi-divine* inventive faculty whose contribution is a substantive element of what can and should be considered as the rationality peculiar to the historiographic task. (2007[1992]:108).

By conceptualizing imagination in such a way, this faculty, naturally ascribed to the artistic domain, enters the realm of history from the heights, positioning itself as a basic tool without which it is impossible to write history. O’Gorman demonstrates this by showing the presence of imagination even when it is most vehemently denied: positivist historiography. He argues that despite the purportedly objective aims of this tradition, which defends that history is simply a heuristic activity driven by the factual and truthful description of the facts registered in the documents, the only criterion by which an investigation is terminated is when historians “feel” they have succeeded in gathering enough material to be able to adequately present the event in question (2007[1992]:95). That *feeling* which is present in historiographical practice regardless of one’s school of thought, and which manifests itself in many different ways, for example as intuition or even as a practical necessity to end the research in order to meet a deadline, transcends what any historical evidence can testify to. In this sense, and contrary to the realist ethos that allegedly focuses exclusively on the records, it points to the existence of processes that go beyond the documents. All that which lies outside the text but which forms an essential part of the historiographic activity, impossible to determine in a scientific scheme, which is why O’Gorman describes it as a “*quasi-divine*” faculty, constitutes the imagination.

O’Gorman, nonetheless, goes even further. He conceives imagination not only as something that is needed on the more empirical level of historiographical practice, i.e. when an investigation is about to come to an end, rather, it is essential to historical knowledge. At this point, his position is incredibly similar to that of Collingwood from whom he translated the *Idea of History* in 1952. In this book, we find a section entitled “The historical imagination” in which the English philosopher mentions that imagination is not ornamental but structural to historical knowledge (2004:323). For both Collingwood and O’Gorman, imagination is not capricious, arbitrary, or merely fanciful; it appears as what is most proper to historical thinking insofar as it allows for the construction of networks of meanings of events that occurred in the past and resonate in the present.

O’Gorman’s of imagination is always given with an eye on the problem of truth. If we accept imagination as an indispensable ingredient of historical

knowledge, are we denying the existence of truth? If the historian's creative faculties are essential to the construction of historical narratives, does this compromise the pursuit of veracity? O'Gorman is resolute in his assertion: the acknowledgment of imagination does not equate to historical deception. Rather than a mere product of evidence meticulously woven into a narrative fabric, rather than mere correlation, *historical* truth is a profound, almost "revelatory" moment. He dramatically terms it an "apocalyptic insight" deeply intertwined with the historian's personal experiences, her unique worldview, and her capacity to forge connections between the past and the present. (2007[1992]:108) The key to his argument lies in distinguishing scientific from historical truth. The latter, he says, does not dwell in the facts but "behind" them. (2007[1976]:96) It is the function of the historical imagination to put together *this* truth that is neither self-evident nor given in advance, that cannot simply be unveiled. A truth that is nothing more than the choice and defense of a particular way of attributing meaning to a series of data that are relevant to the historian's life horizon. A defense that does not imply that documentary work is superficial or even dispensable but is always subordinated to a greater philosophical principle: that which denies that truth can simply be discovered. If it were so, O'Gorman asserts, "history would have been written once and for all" (2007[1976]:96).

The critique of the idea that the past can be revealed once and for all and therefore does not require imagination to rethink it in terms of new findings, new needs, and new ways of thinking about the world, was a constant in O'Gorman's life. The discussion appears in the more mature texts, informed by his historiographical practice on the history of America and Mexico, to name two examples, but also in his early writings. In this sense, the discussion about discovering or inventing historical knowledge resurfaces again in his meditations about the historical imagination. Against the belief that one can discover or uncover the past, which is presumed to be there, ready to be dusted off, O'Gorman places the belief that the past must be invented using historical imagination to respond to specific needs dictated by the historian's life. Again, O'Gorman reiterates that "truth in history is nothing other than the adequacy of the human past (selection) to the vital demands of the present." (2007[1945]:18) In other words, the authenticity, if not the veracity, of history is at stake in its ability to impact the present.

O'Gorman's elevation of imagination to the status of epistemological faculty transcends the frontiers of historical writing to settle in a larger ethical discussion regarding human freedom. A discussion that is set out at greater length in *The Invention of America*, and not in his texts expressly dedicated to the philosophy of history. Here he argues the following:

As long as man conceives himself as something already made for all time according to a previous and unalterable model, he will have to

imagine that his world has the same unchangeable structure or nature. But, conversely, if man conceives himself no longer as something definitely made, but rather as a possibility of being, the universe in which he finds himself will not seem to him an insurmountable limit and an alien reality, but an infinite field of conquest to carve out his world, the product of his effort, his technique and his imagination. (...) It will be, then, a world in the process of being made, always a new world." (1977:76)

The recognition of imagination as an essential component of history implies a twofold ethical resolution. To account for this, it is worth remembering that one of the most characteristic features of realism is its adherence to what is there: the historian must display the facts as they "really happened". In this supposed adherence to the past without any interference from the narrator, history is deprived of any kind of transformative aspiration. This spirit is, precisely, contrary to the ideal of reality as something already given, ready to be discovered. For O'Gorman, to demand that history renounce the desire to imagine things differently is to "dehumanize" it (2007[1976]:93). And so, against this dehumanization, he proposes an almost utopian vision that thinks of the real as always in the process of being conceived in another way. From this follows his two ethical considerations:

First, for O'Gorman, the realist defense that the past can be told once and for all implies assuming that there are totalitarian ways of imagining the real. And that, he points out in several texts, is nothing but the breeding ground of "despotic dictatorships" (2007[1976]:98). Second, the attempt to eliminate subjective influence by renouncing imagination undermines the historian's responsibility. O'Gorman suggests that the historical truth emerging from an imaginative act acknowledges the unique and particular nature of history, demanding that historians take ownership of their work. When facts are believed to speak for themselves, the author's signature becomes irrelevant. Instead, O'Gorman advocates for a view of history that not only celebrates the multiplicity of perspectives as an antidote against any form of absolutism—ideological, political, cultural, etc.—, but demands that historians take responsibility for their interpretations. Thus, by acknowledging the subjective nature of historical understanding and the role that imagination plays in the transformation of mere occurrences into histories, historians can engage in a more critical exploration and use of the past.

7. CLOSING REMARKS

In the 1960s, in one of the polemics between Edmundo O'Gorman and Marcel Bataillon, on the occasion of an anniversary of the "discovery" of the Americas, the latter referred to the former pejoratively as a "philosopher-historian" (1965).

Some years later, both Walter Mignolo (1984) and Álvaro Matute (1996) revisited the term with a positive connotation, as part of a praise of the Mexican historian's thought due to his acute historical analyses based on philosophical premises. This article is a continuation and celebration of that attempt to achieve a systematic reflection on history. It is also a recognition of O'Gorman's legacy and his never-ending defense of history as an autonomous and independent discipline that needed to find its epistemological grounds outside of the traditional sciences. In this regard, we claim that O'Gorman inaugurates and is one of the most important representatives of a Mexican historiographic tradition that is both critical and propositional of the simple and complex question: What is history?

Throughout the discussion we have proposed here, we have been able to review nearly fifty years of a prolific and complex academic production that insists on the need to provide a philosophical foundation to the historiographical task. It is a foundation that, as we have already mentioned from the beginning, is based on the historicist premise according to which everything that constitutes the human being is marked by its changing, perennial, accidental condition. The unfolding of this premise impacts historical activity at all levels.

At the most practical level of research development, adhering to the idea that things do not have a given nature, but a constructed, or rather, invented one, implies the recognition and defense of imagination as the mechanism that allows us to transform a series of data into coherent narratives. Theoretically, the principle of historicity requires approaching the past by thinking of it as sets of ideas and beliefs that account for a certain way of understanding the world in a given time and space. From this stems the idea that historical entities such as America do not have in themselves a being that can simply be discovered, but that it is necessary to invent. If we think about the effects of this defense of historicity we arrive at the discussion of historical knowledge as an exercise that allows us to recognize and foster historical consciousness. A consciousness that, while inviting us to recognize our historical nature, also invites us to recognize that what we say, think, and know about the world shares that same ever-changing nature.

Lastly, O'Gorman's philosophy of history implies an ethical dimension that is both critical and proactive. On the one hand, his idea of thinking of history as an antidote to any discourse that is assumed to be absolute, unquestionable, and immutable, is incredibly relevant. O'Gorman's philosophy of history helps curb totalitarian, exclusionary, and discriminatory discourses that we hear with some frequency nowadays. On the other hand, the call to exercise a historical and critical conscience is also a plea for the freedom of people to imagine other ways of conceiving their past, present, and future. O'Gorman says it clearly when he insists that human beings and their creations are not given entities, but entities always in the process of becoming.

The above allows us to insist, as we did at the beginning of this text, that O’Gorman’s proposal can well be placed in line with that developed by authors today recognized as key signatures of reflection in the philosophy of history. However, a considered reading of his work also forces us to recognize some of its silences. One in particular interests us, because it opens the door to reflect on how to update his legacy in the contemporary context of the 21st century.

O’Gorman states that the only method to account for the principle of historicity in historiographic practice is the narrative method. In his work, we find few specific prescriptive reflections on it. Be that as it may, we can fill in some of the gaps by clarifying that the idea of the historical imagination implies for O’Gorman the reintroduction of the question of the poetic in historiographic practice. In O’Gorman’s words, it entails the acceptance of historical knowledge as a “liberating act” that reveals the “creative force of conscious life” (2007[1956]:65). O’Gorman insisted that the capacity to invent history was something like developing a skill. The transformation of occurrences into narratives, the description of intentionality, and the creation of meaning could not be simply learned from a textbook. It was the cultivation and constant exercise of an almost poetic or artistic ability that enabled these capacities to be at play in constructing historiography. We think that his idea of “the narrative method” had something to do with this constant exercise and acknowledgment of the aesthetic nature of the historian’s work.

Furthermore, to say that history is a creative invention entails a certain discomfort for those who assume that the discipline is a science that provides absolute and immutable truths. For figures like O’Gorman, on the contrary, invention is a celebration of the freedom of human beings to be the architects of a certain sense of their life horizon, and a call to take responsibility for the ideas we believe and the beliefs on which we stand. It is a poetic but also an ethical invitation.

We would like to end these reflections with a phrase from O’Gorman that in some way serves as a beacon towards which to direct our efforts.

I want history as unpredictable as is the course of our mortal lives; a history susceptible to surprises and accidents, to fortunes and misfortunes . . . a history free of the shroud of essentialism and the straitjacket of an allegedly necessary causality; a history that is only intelligible under the light of the imagination; a history-art, close to its literary narrative cousin; a history of daring flights and always as suspenseful as our loves; a history that mirrors the changes in the manner of man’s being, which thus reflects the movements of whim so that the degrading metamorphosis of man as a mere plaything of an inexorable destiny does not operate when we focus on understanding the past. (2007 [1976]:109)

Today, almost thirty years after O’Gorman’s death, we ask ourselves how to carry on his legacy and this dream. It seems to us that by way of some annotations to be developed in the future, we should think of pedagogical mechanisms that allow us to teach our students to exercise their critical and imaginative historical conscience. If history as an invention is, above all, a creative practice, it may be time to teach our history students how to exercise critical and imaginative writing. One of the avenues that it left open is a call to think, collectively, about new pedagogies to come.

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