

Johann Martin Chladenius, *General Historiography* (1752)

Abstract

In this early work of German historicism, Johann Martin Chladenius (1710–1769) laid the groundwork for important developments in hermeneutics and textual interpretation. The selection introduces Chladenius's ideas about perspective and the transformation of history into narrative. In the wake of the Early Modern revival of skepticism about the “knowability” of facts, Chladenius maintained a belief in the reality of events, objects, and historical individuals. He insisted, however, that historical knowledge was distinct from other ways of knowing (for example, in the natural sciences) and that the perspective from which historical facts were known or reported had to be considered.

Source

[...]

Chapter Six on the Transformation of History^[1] in Narrative.

§. 1. Contents of this Chapter

If we want to understand the true shape of history, or rather of the stories [historians tell], it is not enough for us to know how these events are portrayed to the observer in different ways, as in mirrors of various genres and positions, as has been discussed in the previous chapter; rather we must be aware of another act of the soul, which precedes the narrative, which we will call the transformation of history. For the events of history can never be told completely as they were experienced at the time, but only according to a particular image that is extracted from that experience and its presentation in memory. We do not relate things as we experience them and as they are taking place, but after the fact; and we are guided by the picture that has been engrained in our soul by this experience. This, however, is not perfectly identical with the perception itself, meaning that a number of changes are thus introduced as soon as we take it upon ourselves to tell others about the subject.

§. 2. Necessary Separation of Events that Have Just Happened.

In our experience, it is possible to perceive of many things at once, whereas it is impossible to put all those things into words at the same time in narrative. To initiate festivities, bells are rung simultaneously with the firing of canons, but I cannot relate both events together; rather one must wait for the other. I see someone's face all at once, all the features together, but I cannot describe them all at once. And so it is that almost all such experiences are composed of a number of details, meaning that, although they are experienced all at once, they still can never be told in this way. This creates a conundrum, namely, where should one commence the narrative or description? If one does not begin at the right place, then the account is confusing in the end, and no one understands the matter, or it is at least dull and unpleasant to listen to or read.

§. 3. Necessary Omission of Numerous Details

Many aspects of our perception are determinable: [we classify things] according to length, size, breadth—we can assess these characteristics by sight fairly accurately; according to number, when there are not too many

objects—for example, how many tables, chairs, mirrors are present; according to color, which can be changed by dust and other circumstances without actually changing its name or type. And also according to intensity: how warm it is, how bright it is, etc. These things are not all that difficult to express in words, but rather quite common [expressions], so that one might easily spend hours describing a very brief visit. As a result of these difficulties, the witness to what happened omits—indeed, must omit—a number of individual details in his planned narrative. One has only to consider, when one describes how a scene looked in a church, in a room, in a workshop, or in a street, whether one does not always, even when one wants to describe and relate it as thoroughly as possible, leave out a great deal and retain the essence.

[...]

§. 8. Deliberate Selection of Certain Elements of an Event

The perspective of the observer limits what he sees; not all spectators see an object from the same point of view (§. 8. seqq. C. 5.); this is all the more true of a story when it comes to its telling. When we watch, we are not fully in control of what we perceive because it is mainly a matter of what stimulates our senses most intensely. A diamond-studded dress at a solemn event will draw the attention of even those spectators who do not wish to pay attention to magnificent clothing: they will feel the power of the sparkling light. A barking dog will drive even the most intent listener crazy. In short, we know that we are not in full control of our senses (see also, Wolff's *Gedanken von Gott, der Welt* 2c. §. 226.). When we have formulated an impression of something once, however, we then become masters of our impression; each [of us] can see it from his own viewpoint. And this means primarily, as we have shown, that one can only ever see an object from one side (§. 13. C. 5.) and thus show a particular perspective (§. 14. C. 5.). We omit namely that which does not fit our perspective and let such details remain in the dark; we occupy ourselves with that which pleases us or serves our purposes: this then— if we do not notice immediately, and are not willing to change anything—has a significant influence on our narrative, but often enough this happens with our full knowledge and intent.

§. 9. Structuring the Narrative with a Certain Purpose

For when we want to tell a story, there must be a reason why we want to tell it: there are a number of conceivable reasons for this. 1) Humans have a natural drive to make their thoughts known to others; and it gives huge relief to the heart when we can share our affairs—which are nothing other than history—with others. This is the first source of many stories: whereby, it is worth noting that every person soon realizes that others are not very well served by listening to stories about day-to-day business and events that they can just as well know about themselves (§. 8. C. 4.); as a result, each person tries his best to fashion his narrative in such a way as to make it seem like something unique or even wonderful, and something new. 2) Anyone who is assigned to investigate or convey a matter is bound to report on what happened and what he thought about it. In this case, thoroughness is the top priority. 3) Quite often one person tells another something for fun or to pass the time, in which case anything unpleasant must be left out, except to the extent that it can be told in an amusing way. 4) The main reason, however, that we tell stories is so that the listener can act accordingly and make a decision. And in this case, it is clear that we should only leave out as much of the story of our experience as serves our business and influences this decision. Hence, depending on its purpose, the narrative takes on a different form than the actual experience on which the narrative is based. And these methods for changing the [his]story are principles of natural logic that emerge from one's own soul and might be considered an innate art of narrative.

§. 10. Significant History is Transformed into an Event

Nearly all kinds of possible situations have their general terms and types, which are common knowledge (§. 21. C. 4.): these occur to the observer along with the appropriate words: hence he will, among the other changes he makes, also change what he has seen and observed in this respect in order to express the entire [hi]story in such general terms, and as a single, holistic event in a single sentence, which contains only a few characteristics of an individual situation, i.e., the time or people or place or the most important details (§. 21. C. 4.). For example, if someone recounts a nuptial ceremony, a siege, a diplomatic envoy, or mission that he has personally witnessed. For we tend to see the history of many years or centuries as one [hi]story—the Thirty Years War, for example, the wars of Alexander’s successors: so the little bit that a single person can observe himself is easier to summarize in such a brief form.

§. 11. Extracting the Main Point from a Story

When a story is transformed into a single sentence, this sentence and what it contains are then called: the main objective, the main point, the substance of the story. It is therefore a curious transformation of the [hi]story in narrative that one extracts the main objective from it (§. 10.). This is typically the part that those who understand the least about the subject nevertheless know and are able to find out, whereas actual witnesses often deliver various messages depending on the circumstances and particular situation. As the origin of the term suggests, however, the main point is not just related to the inner nature of the matter, but rather mainly to the observer, who sums up in one single sentence what he has perceived of the events in question from his own perspective.

§. 12. Models and Production of Narrative

All our conceptions of things are called images, especially when they concern things that can be perceived by our eyes. Now, we have seen how the image of a story that an observer has formed via his senses changes before it is even put into narrative form, and this happens in various ways: by separating things that happened simultaneously (§. 2.); by mixing up perceptions and actual occurrences (§. 5.); by general impressions (§. 4.); by the inevitable omission of many individual details (§. 3.); by unintentional overstatement and understatement (§. 6.); by the use of general comments (§. 7.); by leaving out many things (§. 8.); and, finally, for various reasons (§. 9.), by transforming the whole story into a single event (§. 10.); which, in turn, is united into a single narrative, so that we might speak of all these images as a single event without mixing things up and so we can produce a moral. So we want to speak of this conception of a [hi]story, as it is originally formed by the senses, as the model [or archetype] of history; and we shall call the changes that we make to this image, before it can be told, the production of narrative.

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NOTES

[1] Translator’s note: German uses the same word—*Geschichte*—for both “history” and “story.” In this translation, the English terms were used as seemed most fitting for the surrounding text, but this semantic difference requiring such a choice changes the nature of Chladenius’s argument. In a few instances, I have chosen to remind the reader of this issue by using “[hi]story” in the translation. Likewise, the German term *Erzählung* has been rendered as both “story” and “narrative,” as context dictated. Indeed, not only the process of narration is transformative, but also the process of translation.

Source: Johann Martin Chladenius, *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*. Leipzig, 1752, pp. 115–18, 122–27.
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