

The Modern Invention of Barbarians: Ethnicity and the Transmission of Form*

ERIC MICHAUD

The writing of history has always been one of the major tools of power. It shares with art not only the capacity to depict something that never existed but also the capacity to bring about the new simply by describing it. Just as there was no London *smog* before Turner painted it, the “barbarian invasions” only began to take up a significant place in the European imaginary after the eighteenth century, when a few historians decided to use the idea to political effect in order to influence the course of history.¹ As Hannah Arendt has noted, “The deliberate denial of factual truth—the ability to lie—and the capacity to change facts—the ability to act—are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source: imagination.”² Thus the myth of the barbarian invasions, based as it was on the hypothesis of “alternative facts” situated in a distant past, became a political construct powerful enough to change the history of Europe. At the same time, it was the instrument that made possible the entire rewriting of the history of European culture, a culture from which, up to that point, the barbarians had, by definition, been excluded.

For this reason, we can say that the history of art began with the barbarian invasions. This is not to imply, of course, that the history of art has actually been written down in an unbroken line *since* those barbarian or Germanic-led invasions of the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries of our era, and still less does it mean that art had no history before these “great” invasions. It means, rather, that a true history of art only became possible after that moment, at the end of the nineteenth century, when the barbarian invasions came to be seen as the decisive event allowing the West to enter into modernity, i.e., into the consciousness of its own historicity. The barbarian invasions, from this point on, were

* This essay is a modified version of the introduction to *Les invasions barbares. Une généalogie de l'histoire de l'art*, Paris, Gallimard, 2015.

1. “There may have been fogs for centuries in London. . . . But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them.” Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying” (1889), in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 312.

2. Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers,” in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1972), p. 5.

no longer thought of as the major catastrophe that had plunged Europe into the obscurity of the Middle Ages. On the contrary, they were seen as a salutary release from a long period of stagnation that could only have ended in decay. Up until the middle of the eighteenth century or thereabouts, it had been accepted that the irruption of the barbarians into the empire had precipitated the latter's decadence and fall. After 1800, however, the new blood of the northern races came to mean the renewal, the physiological, political, and cultural rejuvenation, of the peoples of the empire: "By opening up springs from beneath, and pouring floods of barbarians over the dry and withered surface, the stagnant life was refreshed by the new blood which was infused into it; and the dry and faded was again clothed with a new verdure."³

Such, then, was the picture of the barbarian invasions that became established, for a long time, in people's minds. It was a picture that carried with it the idea of vigorous peoples overflowing with a creative instinct that was sadly lacking in the decadent Romans and their subject peoples. As it flowed throughout the empire, then, this new blood of the barbarians had destroyed nothing; rather it had preserved the ancient art, just as it produced a new art that was necessarily anti-Roman and anti-classical. The heritage of this art was still there to be seen in Europe fifteen centuries later. Quite suddenly, with this fantastic narrative, artistic styles became entirely dependent upon race and blood.

A good number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historians were happy to depict the barbarians as peoples who were as strong physically as they were racially or ethnically homogeneous. The ethnography of antiquity, in fact, provided them with models for this, models based on the double postulate of the homogeneity and the continuity of the "foreign" peoples. Had not Tacitus himself, from the end of the first century CE, described the multitude of peoples that he named Germanic as a single population, without mixture, and of pure race? Their physical traits, he affirmed, are "everywhere the same" (*Germania*, IV). Diversity and complexity at home contrasted thus with uniformity and simplicity elsewhere. A contributor to Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* wrote that men resembled each other far more among wild peoples than among the civilized.⁴ Added to this, as we see in Pliny, is the principle of the continuity of peoples through time. They are understood to never disappear and to always keep the same physical and moral traits.⁵ The history of art was built upon such anthropological paradigms. In tasking itself with describing the objects produced by peoples assumed to be homogeneous, enduring from century to century and always unchanging, it sought to make of these objects the irrefutable evidence of that identity and homogeneity. It was to this end that the history of art fashioned its own concepts,

3. Joseph von Goerres, *Germany and the Revolution*, trans. John Black (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1820), p. 199.

4. Pierre Jacques Changeux, *Traité des extrêmes ou éléments de la science de la réalité* (Amsterdam: Darkstée and Merkus, 1767), vol. 1, pp. 375–76.

5. Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 49.

its tools of interpretation, and these tools have survived the collapse of their very own presuppositions.

The barbarian invasions were thus in large part a Romantic invention, inseparable from the formation of the nation-states and the rise of nationalism in Europe, and they have since continued to be a controversial and sensitive subject among historians. Was the decay of the empire inevitable, or was it caused by the arrival of the Germanic peoples? Did the latter suddenly coalesce and invade in compact masses, or was their entry into the empire a long and drawn-out process? Did the Romans themselves ask for it? Were the Germanic peoples peaceful or warlike? Were they peasants? “Roman civilization did not die its own quiet death. It was murdered.”⁶ These famous words, written under the Nazi occupation by a French historian, were published in 1947 shortly after a war with a perceived hereditary enemy. They tell much about the extent to which the position of the observer, in space and time, is always a determining factor in the writing of history.

The idea generally accepted up until the time of the Second World War—that the empire had collapsed through its own internal decay—has never completely disappeared, even though it has become difficult today to speak of a Roman “decadence.” In addition, the picture of cruel and destructive barbarian hordes (a picture that appeared destined to belong forever to the European imaginary) was nonetheless strikingly transformed around the turn of the twenty-first century, rejoining, as a result, the views of Fustel de Coulanges at the end of the nineteenth century. Was it really possible to speak of “Germanic invasions” when these barbarians, who were not even nomads,⁷ had been deliberately called or attracted to Rome, and when, furthermore, “none of them were Germans”?⁸ Today, most historians agree on two points: It is no longer possible to consider the groups entering into the territory of the empire as homogeneous peoples, and those peoples, who had always been called Germanic, included very few “Germans.” It was Tacitus’s *Germania*, rediscovered in the fifteenth century, Jordanes’s *History of the Goths*, and Paul Diacre’s *History of the Lombards* that allowed a few humanists in the sixteenth century to imagine that the numerous barbarian peoples living beyond the Rhine and the Danube—Burgundians, Saxons, Alamanni, Goths, Vandals, Franks, Herules, Visigoths, Alans, etc.—were all “Germanic” tribes (*Stämme*) and that they were accordingly the most authentic ancestors of modern Germans.⁹ This notion of an absolute continuity between the

6. André Piganiol, *L’empire chrétien (325–395)* (Paris: P.U.F., 1947), p. 422.

7. Lawrence Nees, “Introduction,” *Speculum* 72, n. 4 (October 1997), p. 960.

8. Walter Goffart, “None of Them Were Germans: Northern Barbarians in Late Antiquity,” *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2006), pp. 187–229.

9. Tacitus, *Germania*, ca. 98; Jordanes, *Getica*, 551; Paul Diacre (Paul the Deacon), *Historia Langobardorum*, ca. 788; Beatus Rhenanus (1485–1547), *Rerum Germanicarum libri tres*, Bâle, 1531. See further Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*; Klaus von See, “Der Germane als Barbar,” and “Vom ‘Elden Wilden’ zum ‘Volk der Dichter und Denker’: Die Anfänge der Germanen-Ideologie,” in *Barbar, Germane, Arier: Die Suche nach der Identität der Deutschen* (Heidelberg: 1994), pp. 31–82.

“Germanic” and the modern Germans has persisted, and still today, some historians claim to be writing “a synthesis of the German past from the arrival of the Germanic peoples in the Western world up to the Reunification of 1990,” as if it were possible to write a two-thousand-year history of a single and unchanging “German people.”¹⁰

Yet as soon as one accepted, along with Tacitus, the fiction of a Germanness common to these heterogeneous populations, it was very easy to make the “Germanic peoples” the source of modern Europe. German patriotism in the eighteenth century, thoroughly anti-French in its outlook, did not deny it. For Herder, it was at the point when the Roman Empire appeared exhausted, agitated, and dislocated that “in the north a *new human being* was born. . . . *Goths, Vandals, Burgundians, Angles, Huns, Heruli, Franks and Bulgarians, Slavs and Lombards* came—settled, and the whole modern world from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea, from the Atlantic to the North Sea, is their work, their race, their constitution!”¹¹ A few years after this, a minister of Frederick II, who was, like Herder, opposed to the “Romanist” views of the sovereign, wrote: “The Franks, Burgundians, Anglo-Saxons, Lombards, Vandals, Goths, Rugiens, and the Heruli, the major peoples who destroyed the Roman Empire, and who founded the present monarchies of Europe, were all of Germanic origin.”¹² It was fictions of “racial” unity such as these that allowed the barbarian invasions to be made, during the next two centuries, into a decisive episode in the eternal war waged by the “Germanic races” against what were soon to be called the “Latin races.”¹³

Late antiquity, however, did not speak of the “migration of peoples” (nor of *Völkerwanderung* or *migratio gentium*), and the barbarians who infiltrated the empire were quite unaware that they belonged to the “Germanic” peoples.¹⁴ Rather, the distinction between a *populus romanus*, possessing a history and a constitution, and the more or less wild *gentes*, living beyond the Rhine and the Danube, was a Roman political construction that was to persist well after the fourth and fifth centuries, while the differences between Romans and barbarians were to become increasingly uncertain. At the same time, however, this persistent opposition between an “us” and a “them” survived equally well, but in reverse, in a certain

10. Henry Bogdan, *Histoire de l'Allemagne de la Germanie à nos jours* (Paris: Perrin, 2003).

11. Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Philosophical Writings* (1774), ed. and trans. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) pp. 300–01.

12. Comte de Hertzberg, “Dissertation aiming to explain the causes and the superiority of the Germans over the Romans & to prove that the North of Germania or Teutonia between the Rhine & the Vistula, & principally the present Prussian Monarchy, is the original land of these heroic nations, who in the celebrated migration of peoples destroyed the Roman Empire, & who founded & peopled the principal monarchies of Europe,” *Huit dissertations...* (Berlin: Decker and Fils, 1787), pp. 28–29.

13. Thus the historian Gervinus saw in the Reformation “the renewal of the opposition of the Latin and Germanic races,” still visible in the division between a “Germanic” North America and a “Latin” South America. Georg Gottfried Gervinus, *Introduction à l'histoire du XIXe siècle*, trans. François van Meenen (Bruxelles: Flatau, 1858), p. 39.

14. Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*, p. 13.

Germanic and Germanist tradition. It did so by way of other oppositions: *Kultur* against *Zivilisation*, of course, but also “civilisations sympathiques” against “civilisations politiques,”¹⁵ and, more generally, through the contrast between populations judged to be racially homogeneous and those that seemed to be made up only of a simple, political conglomerate, and that were lacking an “organic” foundation. In drawing up these rudimentary taxonomies, the modern thinkers deliberately ignored all those individuals who were simultaneously Roman and barbarian, just as, more broadly, they ignored the extreme fluidity of social, political, and “ethnic” identities that blurred the frontiers more than could any incursions by armed bands. As for these latter, Fustel de Coulanges was already arguing that “many of these Visigoths, Burgundians, and Vandals, that we read about in history, were Italians, Gauls, Spaniards, Africans. They intermixed with the Germanic peoples, and merged with them. They made the invaded populations believe that the invaders were very numerous; and they have made posterity believe it as well.”¹⁶

To compound the confusion, the names that the Romans gave to often heteroclitite populations covered groups whose members could change considerably over time. The continuity of the name thus created the false and misleading idea of a great “ethnic,” i.e., biological, continuity. These, then, were not the names of “nations.” They were rather “claims for unity under leaders who hoped to monopolize and to embody the traditions associated with these names. At the same time, these leaders were appropriating disparate traditions and inventing new ones.”¹⁷ Ethnic homogeneity and continuity were therefore essentially romantic and singularly reductive descriptors. Europe was projecting its national and racial aims onto its past. As Fustel de Coulanges was to say, with his usual gift for understatement, “The modern spirit is everywhere taken with ethnographic theories, and it brings this prejudice to the study of history.”¹⁸

Now, it was through the adoption of these two fundamental theses of ethnic/racial homogeneity and continuity that the history of art was to come to be an integral part of the great narrative of the war between the races. This narrative, through the history of art, was to take on a new cultural and political significance once the art object was called upon to speak to the identity no longer of its individual creator but also to that of the ethnic group—“people” or “race”—that was understood to have produced it. In seeking to cast a historical light upon their objects, the two great tutelary figures of the discipline of the history of art, Giorgio Vasari and Johann Joachim Winckelmann, had both, with two centuries between them, conceived the development of art according to the template of life. For

15. Viollet-le-Duc in 1863.

16. Fustel de Coulanges, *L'invasion germanique et la fin de l'empire* (1891; Paris: Hachette, 1904), p. 552.

17. Geary, *The Myth of Nations*, p. 155–56.

18. Coulanges, *L'invasion germanique*, p. XII.

Vasari, the history of the fine arts had been interrupted by the arrival of the barbarians, and it began again only with the Medici. For Winckelmann, the history of great art had been definitively curtailed by the barbarian invasions. Vasari sought to establish biographies of artists, thus creating vague local genealogies—what were later to be called “schools.” His famous *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters Sculptors and Architects* (1550 and 1568), a monumental work dedicated to the glory of Florence and the grand duke of Tuscany, was assuredly based upon a biological conception of art. Accordingly, just as an artist’s style developed and reached maturity in a way that was analogous to his or her own life, the development of the arts in general went through all of the stages leading from childhood to old age and decrepitude. Thus the decline of art in the Roman Empire appeared to Vasari at times to be as inevitable as the decline in the life of a human being, while at other times he hinted that the causes of this decline were to be found not in the empire itself but rather in Christian iconoclasm and in the depredations of the barbarians, who did away with the most notable classical models. Two centuries later, Winckelmann’s *History of Ancient Art*, a work that culminated in the analysis of that art’s “downfall” and “death,” inaugurated a new biological conception of style. What was for Vasari something essentially individual here becomes collective. According to Winckelmann, each of the peoples of antiquity had developed a particular style that was born, lived, and died with them. And yet, all the while claiming that the life of a style was to be thoroughly identified with the life of its people, Winckelmann nonetheless extolled, in an utterly contradictory fashion, the atemporality of classical art—a norm set up against the art of his time, which he saw as decadent.

It was to fight against the atemporality of classicism, to fight against his norm proclaimed as eternal, that scholars and artists began to praise precisely those sorts of forms that the norm had up until then rejected or simply ignored. The history of art was thus born under the sign of anti-classicism and with the conscious invocation of the barbarians and their arts. Local and historical particularities were brandished therefore as weapons in an arsenal aimed at classicism’s purported universalism. If it so happened that the first objects chosen to this end were the bizarre forms and outlandish proportions of the “Gothic taste,” then this was because, in many European countries, the Gothic style was soon to be seen as a style that was everywhere “national,” providing clear evidence of the inextricable link between its natural inspiration and its barbarian origins. As soon as they were compared with the columns and capitals that shouted out their “Greco-Roman” ancestry, the skyward-thrusting cathedrals, shooting up like so many trees rooted in the national soil, their decorative features echoing the native vegetation, bore witness to another lineage. Thus it was that this Gothic style, which Vasari once called, lamenting its ugliness, “Tudesque,” was to become, from the end of the eighteenth century, an object of national pride first in Great Britain¹⁹

19. Michel Baridon, A. O. Lovejoy, *Le gothique des lumières* (Paris: Monfort, 1993).

and then in France and Germany,²⁰ these three countries being foremost in proclaiming ever more loudly their heritage and descent from barbarian forebears. Modern racial theory was therefore to put itself forward as the theory of the racial determination of cultural forms: The new blood brought in by the Germanic invasions had not only caused the end of classical antiquity, it had also created the new Christian art and thus the opposition, destined to last for centuries, between the “Genius of the North” and “Latinity.”²¹ The influx of new blood had shifted the entire history of the West from an ancient, pagan, and Mediterranean culture to the thoroughly modern and profoundly Christian culture of the North. Hegel’s thought was certainly marked by this new mapping of history. Without, however, giving in to the racialism of many of his contemporaries, Hegel laid out, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, the exceptional fate of the “Germanic peoples.” For Hegel, it was the Germanic peoples who had brought Christianity, and so the Germanic world spirit was to be totally identified with the Christian spirit of the modern world. It had begun with the appearance of the Germanic nations in the Roman Empire and was pursuing its course “until our time.” In the *Lectures on Aesthetics* that Hegel gave in Berlin in the 1820s, what he called “romantic” art was not the same as the Romanticism of the first years of the nineteenth century. Hegel’s “romantic” art followed directly upon the classical art of pagan antiquity; it began with the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, merging entirely with Christian art.

Since the end of the eighteenth century, an increasing number of voices had been claiming that the decisive moment in the history of Europe was not to be written based solely upon Roman sources, but from the point of view of the “Germanic peoples.” As there were no actual barbarian texts, it was the study of “barbarian antiquities,” they argued,²² that would shed new light on a Roman history that had been up to then “written by Romans with the aim of self-promotion, and by Greeks whose aim was flattery.”²³ Only in this way would it be possible to get away from the exclusive admiration and the sterile and deleterious imitation of the Romans. Essentially, at issue was understanding oneself as part of *another* genealogy, and it was a case of finally making one’s cultural heritage coincide with the biological one. In 1805, as Napoleon’s troops occupied the Rhineland, it seemed obvious to Goethe that, after so many centuries, no one could expect the Germans to show any admiration, or to go in for any imitation, of the Greek and

20. See for example “German Architecture,” the famous text that Goethe wrote in 1772 on the cathedral of Strasbourg against the “good taste” of the Italians and the French.

21. See the letters of Henri Focillon, Gilbert Murray, Josef Strzygowski, and Rabindranath Tagore in the Institut international de coopération intellectuelle, *Correspondance 4: Civilisations: Orient—Occident, Génie du Nord—Latinité* (Paris: Société des nations, 1935).

22. Leibniz had, from 1691, called upon his compatriots to explore the soil “in order to re-establish the ancient history of Germania” (Alain Schnapp, *The Discovery of the Past*, trans. Ian Kinnes and Gillian Vardell, [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996], p. 206).

23. Comte du Buat-Nançay, *Histoire ancienne des peuples de l’Europe* (Paris: Desaint, 1772), vol. 1, pp. vi–xv.

Roman “divine models.” Thus he claimed: “We Northerners cannot be exclusively referred to their example. *We have other ancestors to be proud of and many other models to bear in mind.*”²⁴

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In the rest of Europe, of course, claims of barbarian descent were different. The myth of the Frankish origin of the French nobility, introduced by Boulainvilliers, offered a clear case of social and political domination by one “race” over another: a Frankish, i.e., Germanic, aristocracy wielded power over a Gallo-Roman third estate. Montesquieu’s words here are well known: “Our ancestors, the Germans . . .”; “. . . those ancestors who conquered the Roman empire.”²⁵ Phrases such as these were not at all unusual in Europe. After the successive incoming waves of Sueves, Vandals, and Alans, Spain was invaded by the Visigoths, whose kingdom, it is true, did not survive the arrival and conquest of the Moors in 711. The Visigoths, however, did bequeath to Spain its “gothic myth,” the mark of which is still there in the language: In its entry for *godo*, the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* gives “*hacerse de los godos*” (to boast of one’s nobility) and “*ser godo*” (to be of ancient nobility).²⁶ In England or in Scotland, there were many who claimed descent from the Angles, Saxons, Goths, and above all the Normans—so many peoples reputed to be “Germanic” and whose successive conquests clearly attested to their superiority over the indigenous “Celts.” It is only the Langobards or Lombards in the north of Italy, the last barbarians to enter the empire, who (at least until the Lega Nord²⁷) seem to have inspired no pretensions to titles of nobility or superiority.²⁸

Yet the nature of the interest taken in the barbarians did begin to change over the course of the nineteenth century. The historians had so swelled their numbers that the barbarians appeared less a conquering elite than a huge mass of people, migrating from the vague immensity of a borderless Scythia and coming to

24. J. W. Goethe, quoted by Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 330–31. “. . . Aber uns Nordländer kann man auf jene Muster nicht ausschließlich hinweisen: *wir haben uns anderer Voreltern zu rühmen und haben manch anderes Vorbild im Auge.*” From “Geschmack,” remarks following Goethe’s translation of *Rameaus Neffe*, in *Goethe’s Werke*, vol. 36 (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1830), p. 170. My emphasis.

25. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws* (1748), trans. Thomas Nugent (1752) (Kitchener: Batoche, 2001), vol. 1, book 6, ch. 18, p. 108; book 10, ch. 3, p. 157.

26. Online: <http://www.rae.es/diccionario-de-la-lengua-espanola/la-23a- edicion-2014>. See the classic work by Léon Poliakov on which I am drawing here: *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

27. Lega Nord, or Northern League, is an Italian right-wing regionalist party that was formed in 1991.

28. This did not prevent a great number of Germans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from deducing, to the contrary, from all of these barbarian migrations the “Germanic” character of the art and culture of Europe as a whole, including Italy.

impregnate the native populations of Western Europe. The idea of such a migration was certainly not new. Leibniz, at the dawn of the eighteenth century, seeking an explanation for the numerous “common roots” of certain European languages, was already postulating that “this fact comes from the common origin of all these people descended from the Scythians, who, having come from the Black Sea, passed the Danube and the Vistula, and of whom one part may have gone into Greece, the other have filled Germany and the Gauls; a consequence of the hypothesis which makes the Europeans come from Asia.”²⁹

Recalling, no doubt, Jordanes, who saw Scandinavia as the “manufacturer of peoples,” the Romantics were to add to this long migration route the vast detour of the migrants by way of the north. The same delusion of lineage that had so moved Goethe was now to feed, through a new orientalism, the anti-classicism of Pierre Leroux:

We, men of the North, who had left our native forests, and who had left in that place, along with the bones of our forefathers, the poetry of our forefathers, who had forgotten our songs of Ossian and our old epics, created out of traditions themselves borrowed from the Orient, but transformed by our ancestors, in the long pilgrimage that took them from the plateaus of Asia to the ice floes of the North, and to disperse them, like a fertile seed, across Germany, England, Spain and France—we had forgotten all of that, we had abandoned our heritage, repudiated the inheritance that nature gave to us, and we had come, so to speak, like little children who do not yet know how to utter words, to make ourselves the inheritors and disciples of the Greeks and Romans.³⁰

After the 1840s, when the works of Sir Walter Scott had already taken the continent by storm, excavations carried out almost simultaneously in most of the European countries showed, from Spain to Hungary, a growing interest in the tombs of the Germanic tribes that had supposedly invaded those countries. In France, despite the Académie celtique, founded in 1804 with the purpose of unearthing the monuments of Gallic antiquity to stand against the all-powerful Greco-Roman model,³¹ the history of art, unlike those of archaeology and anthropology, only very briefly sought to give support to the historians’ and politicians’ Gallic myth.³² This is because the France of the Restoration, as Renan was to write,

29. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. A. G. Langley (Chicago: Open Court, 1916), p. 297. On the history of the myth of the Indo-Europeans, see the recent work by Jean-Paul Demoule, *Mais où sont passés les Indo-Européens? Le mythe d’origine de l’Occident* (Paris: Seuil, 2014).

30. Pierre Leroux, “De l’influence philosophique des études orientales,” *Revue Encyclopédique* (1832), pp. 69–82 (here p. 75).

31. *Aux sources de l’ethnologie française: L’académie celtique*, ed. Nicole Belmont (Paris: CTHS, 1995).

32. There are two notable exceptions: Louis Courajod, a Germanophile, defended, at the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of a close barbarian kinship between the Celts and the Germans; Henri Focillon, a Germanophobe, sought for “the genius of the race” in *Les pierres de France* (1919),

was marvelously well prepared to receive from Germany “an infusion of new spirit,” and “the Gallic race,” he claimed, was in need of being periodically “impregnated by the Germanic race.”³³ France, therefore, like Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, and England, had taken to digging in the earth in search of objects that were expected to be capable of recounting, over against the narrative of classicism, the great “barbarian,” i.e., essentially Germanic, epic.

“All of the centuries, all of the peoples, are thus hidden in the earth. The Gaul lies down alongside the Roman, and the Roman sleeps beside the Barbarian. These men, it is only necessary to make them speak and to understand their answers; but for this we must not confuse their languages. We must know how to discern the tones, the nuances, the colors, the physiognomies of each people and of each civilization.”³⁴ But neither the bones nor the other objects exhumed from the necropolises ever gave a single, univocal answer. So much so that the “Frankish question,” in Belgium at the end of the nineteenth century, caused violent arguments between Walloon and Flemish archeologists, profoundly shaken in the sense of their own identity. Were the Walloons really Gallo-Romans, and were the Flemish really Franks? Could archeologists conclude, from the fact that dead warriors were dressed as Franks, that they were Franks? The answer was no, because the Gallo-Romans of the Merovingian period used to dress in Frankish style when they were in relations with those who wielded power, i.e., the Franks. Gallo-Romans were members of the same armies as Frankish warriors, and so they bore the same arms and had access to the same military dignities as the Franks; they became, themselves, counts, dukes, etc.³⁵

Archeology and the history of art thus set themselves the same task: to determine the correct “ethnic” lineage for their objects, whether those objects were works of art or mortal remains. As a purely descriptive science of observation, the history of art also assigned its objects to racial groups based upon a few visible signs. Sometimes it was their “tactile” or “optical” qualities that gave them away as “Latin” or “Germanic” (Alois Riegl), and sometimes it was the predominance of linear elements that betrayed a Latin or Southern origin, while the “pictorial” clearly indicated a Germanic or Northern provenance (Heinrich Wölfflin). As for the museums, they tried, from the first years of the nineteenth century, to group fine-art items according to geographical origin and to the “ethnic” lineage of their creators. However, in the same way that a tomb contain-

from the “Celtic landscapes” to the railroad stations of Paris, and often signed his letters: “The old Celt.” See “Lettres de Henri Focillon à Georges OpreSCO,” ed. Radu Ionesco, *Revue roumaine d'histoire de l'art* (Bucarest) 29 (1992).

33. Ernest Renan, *Essais de morale et de critique* (Paris: M. Lévy Frères, 1861), p. 59.

34. Abbé (Jean Benoît Désiré) Cochet, *La Normandie souterraine, ou notices sur des cimetières romains et des cimetières francs, explorés en Normandie* (Paris: Derache, 1855), p. 4.

35. Victor Tahon, *Compte-rendu des travaux du congrès de Charleroi*, Société paléontologique et archéologique de Charleroi (Brussels: Deprez, 1889), pp. 85–87 and 120–25. See Hubert Fehr, *Germanen und Barbaren im Merowingereich* (Berlin: Gruyter, 2010), p. 243, who associates this passage with an identical remark of Fustel in *La monarchie franque*, 1888, p. 296: “The rule that scholars have established for distinguishing between the races in the grave is highly arbitrary.”

ing Frankish arms might very well be holding Gallo-Roman bones, the rooms that museums assigned to the artists of the “Schools of the North” could show works that were perfectly “linear.” These taxonomies presupposed that a collective “manner” or a “style” could not be acquired or bartered, that it was not socially transmitted but innate. It would be a vain task to try to prove that the history of art was—or still is—a racist discipline. It was neither more nor less racist than the other social sciences, and all of them were oriented by racial thinking to classify and create hierarchies of people according to certain somatic and psychological traits. Still, it remains important to understand the nature of the links it forged between people and their works of art, because those links are not yet broken. We give them a semblance of reality each and every time that we look at these objects and search for a sign of their “ethnic,” i.e., collective, origin. This is because the opinion that remains the most commonplace concerning art is that it embodies, better than anything else, the genius of a people.

The history of art was first formed on the model of the life sciences. It claimed to name, describe, and classify its objects as living beings, assimilating artistic creation to a natural process and seeking to understand its development. In looking at works of art as plants, animals, or human beings, and in organizing them according to various grids of similarities and differences, the history of art believed it could bring to light consistencies and continuities, establish genealogies of forms, construct “stylistic families,” and reveal ties of kinship. One of the great constructs of nineteenth-century thought was the idea that “physiological heredity assures us psychological heredity.” Thus, for Hippolyte Taine, an individual inherited not just certain traits from his or her mother or father but a whole “storehouse” containing all of his or her ancestors “going back to infinity.” The consequences of this, Taine added, were considerable, and they allowed one to examine human history through the perspective of the *longue durée*, as one now knew that “the persistence of inherited aptitudes and tendencies” was to play a preponderant part. Thus he could say: “The tenacity of the hereditary and transmitted characteristic explains the obstacles facing a given civilization, religion, or group of mental and moral customs, that seeks to graft itself upon a wild or different stock.”³⁶ This explained why styles were only transmissible through reproduction within the same “stock.” It also explained the principle of the impermeability of cultures to one another, a principle that had already been clearly articulated by Herder. Furthermore, as the nineteenth century was to add, if each culture was the emanation of a race, then clashes between cultures were necessarily clashes between races.³⁷ Certainly, the concept of race was no more semantically fixed then than it has been at any other point in history, including

36. Hippolyte Taine, “Études de psychologie, vol. 1: Th. Ribot, l’Hérédité” (1873), in *Derniers essais de critique et d’histoire* (Paris: Hachette, 1923), pp. 185–93 (here pp. 188–89).

37. Zeev Sternhell, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, trans. David Maisel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). See also interviews with Nicolas Weill in *Histoire et lumières: Changer le monde par la raison* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2014).

today.³⁸ But it has always been used to include and to exclude, and to maintain this impermeability. It caused Maurice Barrès, for example, to declare that he could not understand Greek statues, buildings, and landscapes: “I would have to have the blood of the Hellenes. The blood of the valleys of the Rhine does not allow me to participate in the deep life of the works that surround me. . . . Alas, it is all too clear! We are of two races.”³⁹

The discourse of blood, as today the discourse of the gene, is grounded in a fundamental invisibility. Whether applied to human beings or to art objects, these discourses always connect the visible differences between bodies with natural causes that remain hidden, and those causes are understood to ensure unfailingly the transmission of differences. In this way, these discourses maintain not only that culture is *in* nature but also that it *proceeds* from nature.⁴⁰ They strive, therefore, to construct a more or less stable world in which the arts forever resemble their respective peoples—and vice versa.

—Translated from the French by Nicholas Huckle

38. See the published transcript for Stuart Hall’s video *Race, the Floating Signifier* (dir. Sut Jhally, 1997), <http://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Stuart-Hall-Race-the-Floating-Signifier-Transcript.pdf>.

39. Maurice Barrès, *Le voyage de Sparte* (Paris: Plon, 1906), p. 49.

40. Stuart Hall, *Race, the Floating Signifier*.