

The Origin and Development of Carl Becker's Historiography

by Milan Griffes

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## **Prefatory Note – A Statement of Limitations**

Right now, as you begin to read these words I have written, we are off the map. We are walking through unfamiliar territory, outside of any frame of reference. We have brought baggage along with us for the journey, bits of context, loose associations, biases and beliefs. You are carrying your luggage along with you, and I have had the opportunity to place mine along the way beforehand. Perhaps you have a vague notion of who this man Carl Becker is; maybe you can even summarize his thoughts about history. But leave all that aside for a minute, and walk with me. We are in a special place here, at the very beginning. It is quiet. Unformed. Something to be savored.

I imagine this place to be similar to the first moments of tape from an untrimmed scene of a film, before the clapperboard comes down. The actors are prepping, not yet in character. The director is reviewing some notes with his staff. Perhaps the camera is not set up quite right, throwing the field of view askew. Before we step into the frame of this story, before the clapperboard snaps down and the acting begins, I would like to take a moment to address a couple of points.

The first of these is insufferably self-referential, but you will have to bear with me. The subject of our story, after all, was very fond of self-reference. Becker peppered his lectures with allusions to the lecture hall he was in and the audience he was in front of, and he seemed to get a kick out of doing so. So if this preface comes across as a little flip, please do not take it as irreverence, but rather as a tribute to our subject. I may not be writing in the traditional manner, but that does not diminish the content. Besides, there will be plenty of time for footnotes and scholarly style later on.

Anyway, my first point: in this story (as in any story), there are three parties involved – the subject, the writer (me!), and the reader (you!). Each of these parties is bound by a distinct set of limitations. We are stumbling into literary theory here, but I think it worthwhile to make the role of each party explicit before treading further. The first party is composed of our main subject, Carl Becker, and his contemporaries. There is much more on them in the following pages. For now, suffice it to say that Carl Becker and his contemporaries have been bounded by death. They do not get the chance to reply to my criticisms, or validate my theories. I cannot ask them any of my pressing questions. Instead, I must be content to poke and prod at the scraps they left behind. I will exclude the pieces I find dull or beside the point, and I will showcase the juicy bits, emphasizing how important and interesting they are. Becker and his friends don't get any say in the matter.

As the writer, I am the driving force of this story, though I will rarely step into the frame. In the metaphor above, I would be the director – knitting the thing together, polishing every scene until it is just-so. This is not the easiest role. I am caught between the story I want to tell and a vague obligation to tell the “correct” story. As we will see (as I want you to see), Becker was tied up by the same problem on a grander scale. I move forward under the assumption that any story is better than no story at all.

Like everyone else, I am afflicted with assumptions and biases. Some of these will worm their way into the story I write, despite any amount of self-aware vigilance. So I will provide you with some personal context with the hope that my voice will remain relatable and human after I assume the dread garb of scholarly omniscience.

Selected context:

- *This work is intended to fulfill the senior thesis requirement of my bachelor's degree in history from Michigan State University.*
- *The deadline for this project is fast-approaching. I have mixed feelings about this deadline: on one hand, it prevents me from doing as thorough a job as I would like. On the other hand, if not for deadlines, I would never get anything done at all.*
- *I am 21 years old as I write this, and this is my first piece of substantial writing.*
- *Politically, I consider myself to be center-left.*
- *Religiously, I am agnostic and questioning.*
- *Gender identity: heterosexual male. I am also slightly put off by the flourishing number of gender identities.*
- *I am an only child (my father tells me that this matters).*
- *I pride myself on my ability to write and research.*
- *I am not well-read. I am secretly afraid that I will soon stumble on something that will overturn all the work I have done so far.*

That is all I care to share. After all, this piece is by me, not about me. Now, the wonderful thing about context is that your assumptions and biases will go to work filling in all the gaps, leaving you with a reasonably complete impression of who I am and what I am up to. By the end of your time here, you will feel that you know me nearly as well as you know Becker.

As the writer, I have the luxury of perusing the source material at my own pace (to a degree – I am on a deadline after all). I can read and reread, cross-reference and confirm. You, on the other hand, will have to content yourself with the synthesis that results. You will be

shuttled along at rates of my choosing, moving swiftly past periods I deem insignificant and slowing down to admire the moments I find particularly noteworthy.

But do not despair! You, reader, have the most important role of all. For you are the judge, the arbiter, the final interpreter. Yes, you too have assumptions and biases (I will not presume to outline them for you), but you will come to judgment regardless. In the end, you determine if this is a good story or a poor one. Do I give Becker the treatment he deserves? Is my style clear and clever, or dense and conceited? And this Becker fellow, what is he all about? Are his thoughts worth anything in the first place? This I leave to you.

Now we are ready, I think. The actors all in position, the camera adjusted, the lighting just right. Perhaps the director impatiently fields a few hurried questions from the team. The distant rumbling of the crew fades down as the inevitable “Quiet On The Set!” is shouted anonymously. The scene is called. The clapperboard is held up to the camera and snapped down.

So we begin.

## **Introduction**

Carl Lotus Becker occupies a special position in the line of American historians. With his unassuming manner and close attention to literary form, Becker has retained his original voice better than most of his contemporaries. As Cushing Strout, a later historian at Cornell University, observes, “Becker's colleagues in the New History, Beard, Turner, and Parrington, seem now much more dated than he does.”<sup>1</sup> Becker’s perennially fresh voice, coupled with his radical thoughts about the nature of history, gives him an omnipresent role in the contemporary discussion of historiography. Indeed, Michael Kammen, editor of Becker’s letters, states, “he haunts American historiography as no other historian can.”<sup>2</sup>

The extent and nature of Becker’s “haunting” is outside of the scope of this work. I am not writing a biography, nor do I intend to trace the impact and influence of Becker on later historians.<sup>3</sup> I do not plan to evaluate whether or not Becker was correct in his historiographic thinking. This work is intended as a study of the origin of Becker’s thinking. For this purpose, it is sufficient that his thoughts were influential, challenging, and lasting. This being said, please note that Becker is very much the hero of the work. It is difficult, if not impossible, to study the past without developing a personal affinity towards some of the actors. I am sympathetic (read: biased) towards Becker, the man. However, when my bias appears, I will support it with source evidence as best as I can. This, I think, is all a historian can do.

I am interested primarily in the origin and development of Becker’s historiographic thought. This topic divides neatly into three research questions: (1) What early influences contributed to his thinking? (corresponding to the period from 1873-1910); (2) How did his

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<sup>1</sup> Cushing Strout, “Carl Becker and the Haunting of American History,” *Reviews in American History* 15, no. 2 (June 1987): 338.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Kammen, “*What Is the Good of History?*” *Selected Letters of Carl L. Becker 1900-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), xxviii.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 56-7 for a brief review of literature on Becker

thinking develop and change over time? (roughly corresponding to 1910-1931); and (3) How did Becker reconcile his strong relativist stance with his democratic, liberal convictions? (an ongoing tension, but especially problematic in the lead up to World War II). I will consider each of these questions in turn, following the chronological development of his historiography.

Before moving any further, a brief summary of Becker's theory is in order. Becker is often classed with the New, or Progressive, Historians, a loose grouping of thinkers who reacted against the strictly political telling of history and emphasized the importance of economic and social factors. Becker is also frequently paired with his contemporary Charles Beard; Becker and Beard are considered the dual champions of pragmatic, relativistic historiography.<sup>4</sup> Pragmatic historiography was an objection to scientific history, the school of thought most prevalent among the generation prior to Becker and Beard. The scientific approach to history placed a strong emphasis on historical objectivity: if all the facts were uncovered and all authorial bias removed, the story would tell itself. Becker, Beard, and their followers rejected this notion, asserting instead that bias is inescapably tangled up in the processes of source selection and composition that constitute historical scholarship. Bias, to the relativists, was a necessary component of the historical process. Disinterested objectivity was a dangerous and misplaced ideal for historians: dangerous because it encouraged historians to suppress their biases and assume a distorting guise of detached, omniscient narration; misplaced because it missed the point of historical writing – to use the past as a vehicle for sending a useful message in the present.

Carl Becker was not the loudest relativist critic of scientific history (he preferred self-deprecation and ironic twists to bold statements), but he was one of the earliest. Becker first outlined his historiographic position with his essay “Detachment and the Writing of History.”

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<sup>4</sup> See Cushing Strout's *The Pragmatic Revolt in American History: Carl Becker and Charles Beard*. Becker never liked labels and never strongly asserted his membership of any cause. See p. 46 **n134**



“Detachment” was published in 1910, more than 20 years before the relativist movement gained full traction. As Peter Novick states in his monograph on historical objectivity, *That Noble Dream*, “Becker, unlike his contemporaries, did not need the catalyst of war, or a concomitant abandonment of social optimism, to turn him into a thoroughgoing relativist.”<sup>5</sup> Becker arrived at the relativist camp early, long before anyone else. Indeed, “Becker’s radically skeptical writings appear to have had no discernible impact on historians before the war.”<sup>6</sup> How was it that Becker came into a relativistic mode of thought decades before his contemporaries? What influences drove him to think in this way? To date, these questions have received only cursory examination and pat explanations.<sup>7</sup> A thorough study of the origins of Becker’s historiographic thinking, culminating in the clear position he outlined in 1910 with “Detachment and the Writing of History,” constitutes the first part of the work.

The second part of the work traces Becker’s relativist position as it changes over time, picking up with “Detachment” and continuing through the 1910s, 20s, and 30s. Becker wrote three pieces which explicitly stated his position: “Detachment” (1910), “What Are Historical Facts?” (1926), and “Everyman His Own Historian” (1931). Each of the works support Becker’s central thesis, though their tone and emphasis vary. The most famous statement of Becker’s position came in 1931, when he gave his Presidential Address “Everyman His Own Historian” to the American Historical Association (AHA). The second section of my paper focuses mainly on the years leading up to “Everyman,” with the address itself centered as a sort of climax. Becker was subject to many easily-identified influences during his career, both societal (World War I and its aftermath) and personal (an extended period of illness in the 1920s). In addition, Becker’s

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 107.

<sup>6</sup> Novick, 106

<sup>7</sup> In *That Noble Dream*, Novick makes no attempt to trace the origin of Becker’s historiographic thinking. SEE

correspondence with his friends and colleagues provides an intimate window into the relationships that strongly impacted his thinking.

The work ends with a brief examination of the tension between Becker's relativism and his liberal values. Becker struggled to reconcile his conception of the nature of history with the enlightened, democratic values he held dear. This struggle was ongoing and became especially problematic after he had achieved prominence as a champion of relativism during the 1930s. Becker never arrived at a satisfactory intellectual resolution on the issue, though he did recommit strongly to liberalism during the buildup to World War II. The conflict between Becker's theory and Becker's convictions is emblematic of the disorienting effects of relativism, and is useful to keep in mind when considering the challenges that face relativist conceptions of history today.

As we begin our examination of the development of Becker's thought, please note that none of the influences I catalog should be considered "the key" to understanding Becker. Carl Becker was a complex man, and his historiography reflects this complexity. I believe that Becker's relativism was an original idea, as much as any idea can be called original. This idea grew along with Becker as he came of age in the Midwest. It was influenced by his mentors and his peers. It matured along with Becker as he established himself in academia, first at the University of Kansas, and later at Cornell. Becker reacted to world events and personal developments, and his thinking reflected these reactions. However, not one of these contributing factors should be singled out as *the* factor that sparked the thought. Each had its part to play. Becker himself put this notion well when reviewing an interpretation of his Enlightenment favorite, Voltaire: "Mr. Chase seems to say that if Voltaire had not been beaten by Rohan's lackeys he wouldn't have been Voltaire; whereas I say that if Voltaire hadn't been Voltaire he

wouldn't have been beaten by Rohan's lackeys – or it wouldn't have mattered if he had been.”<sup>8</sup>

The same idea applies to our subject. Becker was not Becker because of any one thing that had happened to him. Becker was Becker because of everything that happened to him, the compilation of a lifetime of experience and contemplation. His thought reflects this.

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<sup>8</sup> Carl Becker, review of *The Young Voltaire*, by Cleveland Chase, *The American Historical Review* 32, no. 3 (April 1927): 646-7.

## **Part One – The Origin of Becker’s Historiography**

### *Family and Childhood*

Carl Lotus Becker was born on September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1873, the second child of the Iowan farmers Charles and Almeda Becker. He was born on the family farm, 240 acres in Black Hawk County, Iowa.<sup>9</sup> He was christened Lotus Carl Becker, named after his uncle Lotus Sarvay (Almeda’s brother). Becker later rearranged his name to Carl Lotus, or Carl L. Becker.<sup>10</sup>

The Beckers were a typical Iowan farming family. Charles and Almeda had four children all together, Carl and three daughters. They came from a mixed European background: Charles Becker was of German and Dutch descent, while Almeda Sarvay’s ancestry was English and French.<sup>11</sup> Almeda came from better circumstances than Charles, her parents were well-off and provided her with a good education. By contrast, Charles’ formal education ended at the age of 12. The move to Iowa was economically-motivated: as Becker put it, his father went to Iowa in order “to acquire much better land at a much lower price in the new West.” Charles Becker first purchased 80 acres, “and to this he afterward added two other ‘eighties.’”<sup>12</sup>

In 1884, when Carl was eleven, the Beckers rented out their farm and moved to the nearby town of Waterloo, Iowa. Waterloo was a growing town – 25 factories and mills were based there by the end of the 1880s.<sup>13</sup> Charles Becker became involved in local politics, and the Becker family continued to attend the Methodist church. Politically, Charles Becker was a conservative Republican; a viewpoint the entire family was expected to share. Carl Becker

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<sup>9</sup> Burleigh Taylor Wilkins, *Carl Becker: A Biographical Study in American Intellectual History* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press and the Harvard University Press), 7. See Wilkins, 18 for Becker’s namesake. Becker mentions his upbringing in *Our Great Experiment in Democracy*, 239-40.

<sup>10</sup> Becker changed his name partly because of the somnolent qualities, partly because his college classmates could not remember “Lotus” (Carl Becker to George Lincoln Burr, February 25<sup>th</sup> 1917, Box 7, quoted in Wilkins, 7).

<sup>11</sup> Wilkins, 6; Becker, *Our Great Experiment in Democracy*, 239

<sup>12</sup> Becker, *Our Great Experiment in Democracy*, 239-40

<sup>13</sup> Wilkins, 8

aligned with his father's ideology for a while as a young man, but eventually would "lean toward the Democrats," as his sister phrased it, in later life.<sup>14</sup>

The Beckers placed a strong emphasis on education. Charles Becker supplemented his meager schooling with substantial self-education.<sup>15</sup> Becker's sister Jessie recalled that "had you met him in later years you would have been sure from his manner of speaking and from his appearance that he was a college graduate."<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Charles Becker had erudite ambitions for his son. In a family-oriented entry of Becker's college journal, Becker recorded a dramatic dialogue between two characters, "father" and "son:"

*Father:* (after long silence) 'Have they got a law school up there at Madison?'

*Son:* (wearily) 'Yes, sir.'

*Father:* 'How long does it take to get through?'

*Son:* 'Why its two years now I guess.'

*Father:* (after short silence) 'Well have you decided yet on what you'll do when you finish up there?'

*Son:* 'No, [sir.]'

*Father:* (after long interval) 'Well I suppose it's a question that [takes] you're time and isn't very easy to decide. But I should almost think you'd want to decide pretty soon. You could work along in that direction there I should think.'<sup>17</sup>

Although the "father" and "son" characters are never explicitly identified, it is no stretch to consider this entry a scene recorded from real life. In a journal written almost entirely at college in Madison, Wisconsin, Becker records this the entry from Waterloo, Iowa, his hometown.

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<sup>14</sup> Letter from Jessie Becker to Carl Becker, quoted in Wilkins, 11 n. 40

<sup>15</sup> Louis Leonard Tucker, Introduction to *The Spirit of '76* (Albany: New York State American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, 1971): 3.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Jessie Becker to Phil Snyder quoted in Wilkins, 7

<sup>17</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, April 8<sup>th</sup> 1895, all letters and the original *Wild Thoughts Notebook* are held at the Cornell University Library; This remarkable entry of Becker's *Wild Thoughts Notebook* is the only appearance of Becker's father in the *Notebook*. It is a window into young Becker's relationship with his father, and it is likely the only surviving record of Charles Becker's words. The entry is also a good example of Becker's early literary ambitions. I have cleaned up the punctuation and filled in a few [gaps], but the dramatic framing and emotive cues in parenthesis are Becker's.

Charles Becker thought his son might do well as a lawyer. The son found the study of law distasteful, though he certainly chose a career where erudition was valued.<sup>18</sup>

So where in this background can we find seeds of Becker's relativism? There is little evidence of a direction connection between his childhood and his historical theory, and rightly so. Historiography is a complex topic, and Becker took a nuanced position on the subject. The earliest traces of this position developed during his time at the University of Wisconsin. However, on the more general issues of career path and social outlook, the influence of his upbringing is apparent.

Becker was raised in a household that prized learning and morality. His upbringing encouraged him to aspire to an intellectual career, one that would have a positive social impact. He achieved this goal with his tenure in academia. In addition, Becker was a child of the Midwest, a region famous for its idealism and individualism. In his 1910 essay "Kansas," his contribution to a festschrift dedicated to his mentor Frederick Jackson Turner, Becker attempted to capture the spirit of the Midwest and its people. He noted three qualities of Midwesterners: their individualism, idealism, and desire for equality. "Kansas" was published in the same year as "Detachment and the Writing of History;" it would be a mistake to conflate the thoughts of the mature Becker with his childhood experiences. But perhaps the individualistic climate of his home opened in Becker the possibility of opposing the academic establishment in the East. And perhaps the idealism of the Midwest, which Becker described as "an idealism that is immensely concrete and practical, requiring always some definite object upon which to expend itself," influenced Becker into pragmatically thinking that history ought to be good for some present,

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<sup>18</sup> See Wilkins, 12 for Becker's thoughts regarding the study of law.

practical purpose.<sup>19</sup> This, of course, is all speculative. But the social and intellectual climate of Becker's youth should be taken into account when considering the development of his ideas, even when the source evidence is lacking.

### *Undergraduate Days – Becker's Thoughts on Religion*

In 1892, when he was 19, Becker departed Waterloo to attend Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa. When Becker arrived, Cornell was a small, struggling, Methodist college.<sup>20</sup> Becker sampled a diverse array of classes in his first year, and many were not to his satisfaction. He enrolled in, and later dropped, courses in engineering, astronomy, German, and Christian evidences.<sup>21</sup> Becker attended Cornell with his cousin and close friend Leonard Sarvay, who caught typhoid fever and died during the school year. According to Becker's sister Jessie, this tragedy contributed to Becker's refusal to return to Cornell after his first year.<sup>22</sup>

The next year, Becker enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, an institution that would have a much greater impact on his intellectual development. During his time at Wisconsin, Becker kept a journal, his fancifully-titled *Wild Thoughts Notebook*. The *Notebook* consists of two notepads; the first entry is from January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1894, halfway through Becker's freshman year.<sup>23</sup> The dated entries continue for a year and a half. In May 1895, Becker stopped dating his entries, and the latter half of the second notepad is full of short, undated items.

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<sup>19</sup> Carl Becker, "Kansas" in *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1935), 17.

<sup>20</sup> Wilkins, 16-17

<sup>21</sup> Wilkins, 17

<sup>22</sup> Jessie Becker's letter is quoted in Wilkins, 18

<sup>23</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, January 20<sup>th</sup> 1894

The *Wild Thoughts Notebook* is an extremely useful source for understanding the development of Becker's thoughts. It contains the earliest surviving writings of Becker; the first instance where we can see the thoughts of young Becker directly, not contorted by later reminiscence. The *Notebook* entries can be divided by topic into four rough categories: character portraits, short stories, philosophical reflections, and responses to the authors Becker was reading. Of particular interest here are the philosophical entries that focus on organized religion, spirituality, and good manners. Young Becker's literary aspirations will be examined in the following section.

At Wisconsin, Becker reacted strongly against the Methodism of his youth. He began to conceive of religion as an intensely personal concept, and detached himself from any of its organized manifestations. This religious detachment persisted for the rest of Becker's life, and contributed to the development of his historiographic relativism.

In his adult life, Becker was comfortably agnostic, if not completely atheist. In 1928, reflecting on his Methodist upbringing, Becker ironically recalled a sermon he heard in Waterloo, "passionately denouncing 'French atheism' in general and Voltaire in particular ... the sermon made a profound impression on me ... [giving] me an interest in atheism and in Voltaire which I have never wholly lost."<sup>24</sup> Becker exaggerated the influence of this one particular sermon (he did not write about it prior to the 1928 book review), but the general antipathy he felt towards religion was seeded by the religiosity of his Iowan home, and began to sprout at university. The road from Iowan Methodist to academic agnostic is a long one, and much of the ground was covered at Wisconsin.

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<sup>24</sup> Carl Becker, review of *America and French Culture, 1750-1848* by Howard Mumford Jones, *The American Historical Review* 33, no. 4 (July 1928), 883-885.



Young Becker did not view the Christian distribution of moral responsibility as appropriate. In the first entry of the *Notebook*, Becker critiqued Thomas Hood's poem "Eugene Aram." Becker was concerned by the theological implications of the poem: "the hero is talking to a boy about murder and sin, striving to impress upon his mind how ... wicked was Cain because he was the first murderer."<sup>25</sup> Becker was not satisfied with the hero's explanation:

"Cain ... seems to be a general dumping ground for all the guilt of murderers in every generation as Adam is for the sin of the world. This thought occurred to me. If some people would blame Adam less for their own follies, and if other people would blame themselves less for Adam's folly the world would be better and the people in it more sensible."<sup>26</sup>

Not only did young Becker find the Christian doctrine of original sin inappropriate, he thought he could provide a better alternative – an equitable, individual distribution of moral responsibility.

Becker's difficulties with Christianity extended beyond doctrine – he was troubled by the structural relationship between organized religion and spirituality. In March 1894, Becker mused metaphysically, "Religion is the relation of man to God. A man's religion is that secret part of his soul which is never revealed to mortal men and which is known to himself and God alone." It followed, then, that "Christianity is an attempt to formulate religion." Becker took care to delineate the appropriate role of a church: "The provision of the Church is educational and charitable, but not reformatory."<sup>27</sup> Although his division is a little fuzzy (how is the Church to educate without spreading its message of reform?), Becker was clearly placing the bulk of religious practice (reforming man's behavior, mission, and outlook) outside of any organization. To the young Becker, religion was an intensely personal practice that could not be adequately

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<sup>25</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, January 20<sup>th</sup> 1894; This first entry of the *Notebook* begins rather suddenly with Becker considering the poem "Eugene Aram." It is possible that earlier volumes of the *Notebook* exist (i.e. from his first semester at Wisconsin), but there is no record of them.

<sup>26</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, January 20<sup>th</sup> 1894; Becker's emphasis

<sup>27</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, March 5<sup>th</sup> 1894

explained to others, let alone organized externally. At the close of this lengthy entry, Becker found affinity with Tolstoy. “Leo Tolstoy’s definition of religion is that it is ‘man’s relation to the universe.’ I think that is about equivalent to saying that it is his relation to his God.”<sup>28</sup>

Religion remained on Becker’s mind for most of 1894. He continued to write sporadically in the *Notebook* (sometimes diligently recording daily entries, sometimes going a month without writing). Around a third of his 1894 entries focus on religion. He consistently framed organized religion in a negative context, either by placing it in opposition to proper social conduct or associating it with stupidity and ignorance. On August 14<sup>th</sup>, he wrote:

It is my idea that people should teach children how to act and let them believe as they please rather than teach them what to believe and let them act as they please. Less religion and more morality would increase the value of many ‘very good’ people.<sup>29</sup>

Again, Becker did not find the Christian account of moral responsibility to be adequate. Here he went as far as to place religion and morality in diametric opposition. In doing so, Becker was not completely discounting religion. Instead, he continued to conceive of religion as intensely private, individual practice. Any attempt to proselytize, communicate, or even “formulate” this practice was folly. In his undergraduate years, Becker rejected Christianity and every other organization of religion.

Becker explicitly stated his disdain for Christianity and its practitioners in the *Notebook*. On October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1894, he wrote a long character sketch of “a very peculiar individual. In the first place, he looks somewhat idiotic.” The man had “bleary eyes, round eyes, and arch brows giving an expression of blankness and almost of foolishness.” And near the end of this sketch, Becker reveals that his subject is a Christian:

He never reads anything but commentaries on books of the Bible. And he has the air of reading these as a sense of duty. He reads a little and then his vacant gaze travels over the

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, August 14<sup>th</sup> 1894

room seeking something more attractive and something which he can appreciate more fully perhaps.<sup>30</sup>

Christianity, it seems, was not up to the moral standards of the young intellectual, nor was it engaging enough to retain the interest of an idiot. And Becker's evaluation of Christians extended beyond atypical oafs. When he went to a Methodist church to hear a string quartet perform Schumann, he noted that the large crowd was "peculiar to a Methodist church ... There is a certain element lacking ... this element, which is really cultured and has good taste in regard to these things and which would hear good things in an opera [house] – why is it impossible to get this element into a Methodist church?"<sup>31</sup> To Becker, Christianity (Methodism in particular) held an anti-intellectual quality that repelled "really cultured" people of "good taste." In college, Becker began to disassociate himself with the Methodism of his Iowa home, and began to admire the sophistication and urbanity of the secular academy.

Yet Becker never came to completely reject religion and spirituality. His separation from his Christian roots was a gradual disenchantment, not a sudden break. On the Sunday after he derided the attendees of the Methodist concert, Becker went to church. In the *Notebook*, he recorded the sermon:

The Reverend Updike said this morning that 'any creed may be measured by the extent to which it can be translated into life.' ... The sermon was on 'What shall I do with my doubts?' and the gist of it was that he ought to lay his doubts on the shelf and cling to the things he believed. Use your positive beliefs, and let your negatives alone ... [Reverend Updike] thinks it is better to have a positive disbelief, even of Christianity, than to have no positive belief in anything.<sup>32</sup>

In this sermon, Becker may have found some resolution from a representative of Christianity. It is the only time Becker quoted a religious figure in the *Notebook*, and one of the few entries that did not frame religion in an explicitly negative way. Becker could consider his criticisms of

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<sup>30</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, October 4<sup>th</sup> 1894

<sup>31</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, Oct 25 1894

<sup>32</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, Oct 28 1894

religion as “positive disbeliefs,” which the sermon affirmed. Not, perhaps, the result intended by Reverend Updike, but good enough for Becker.

In any case, Becker seemed to have settled major issues with Christianity by the end of 1894. Religion appears less frequently in the later *Notebook* entries. When it does appear, it is the subject of mild aphorisms (“a Christian conscience is a curious thing,”) not long discourse.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Becker even began to evaluate his skepticism by the same moralizing criterion he applied to religion: “It is just as vulgar to be parading one’s skepticism and no more so, than to be parading one’s fanaticism.”<sup>34</sup> Becker kept his religious views ambiguous throughout his life, cloaked in wry commentary and indirect statement. Yet we may consider the stance he developed in 1894 – detachment criticism of organized religion with some room for personal spirituality – to be reasonably final. The *Wild Thoughts Notebook* provides the clearest, most direct window into Becker’s thoughts on the matter. As Becker matured intellectually and committed to historical professionalism, his writings focused more on secular subjects and less on theological criticism. In later life, when he did mention religion, it was always from the perspective of a third-party observer. Not condemnatory, but not terribly enthused about the concept either.

So how did religious disillusionment affect Becker’s conception of the nature of history? As identified by Burleigh Wilkins, Becker’s biographer, there exist strong parallels between Becker’s early falling-away from religion and his later historiographic critique.<sup>35</sup> Much of Becker’s historiography deals with the issue of testimony – why should we believe the accounts of witnesses to events? When should we consider them trustworthy? How far should “facts” be broken down, and when should such analysis cease? When young Becker considered questions

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<sup>33</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, undated (after May 8<sup>th</sup> 1895)

<sup>34</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, undated (after May 8<sup>th</sup> 1895)

<sup>35</sup> Wilkins, 22

like these regarding biblical accounts, he found them to be irreconcilable. The Christian story would not fit into his conception of how the world functioned.

Writing in 1910, Becker described his conception of history: “There is no use having a past through which the intellect cannot freely range with a certain sense of security. If we cannot be on familiar terms with our past, it is no good. We must have a past that is the product of all the present.”<sup>36</sup> Becker conceived of history as a “familiar” thing that resides in the present. This conception could not coexist with a religious faith that asserted the events of 2,000 years ago to be objectively, eternally important. Becker’s loss of religious faith was a precondition to the development of his historiography. Perhaps Christianity was merely the first object to be leveled by Becker’s smiling skepticism (which he would later aim at the objects of history, democracy, and the notion of human progress). Or perhaps religion was suppressing the development of Becker’s thought, a mantle that he had to shed before he could think in the way he did. It is impossible to say with any precision. But it is clear that Becker the undergraduate had serious difficulties with religious practice, difficulties that would later arise on a much broader scale.

### *Undergraduate Days – Becker’s Literary Aspirations*

In 1942, late in his career, Becker, gave a talk at Smith College entitled “The Art of Writing.”<sup>37</sup> In this talk, Becker spoke about one of his most basic desires – the desire to write well: “The art of writing, endured always as a malady rather than adopted as a racket, has been

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<sup>36</sup> Carl Becker, “Detachment and the Writing of History” in *Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl L. Becker* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), 13.

<sup>37</sup> Carl Becker, “The Art of Writing” in *Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl L. Becker* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), 121-144. An earlier version of the talk was given at Wells College on October 8<sup>th</sup> 1941.

the most persistent and absorbing interest of my life.”<sup>38</sup> In his youth, Becker wanted above all else to be a writer, an aspiration he would pursue throughout his career. In “The Art of Writing,” Becker begins by describing the origin of his “writer’s malady”:

I was infected at the early age of eleven. Why I should have been susceptible to it is something of a mystery, for at that time I had never read a book, or had a book read to me, or heard any one talk about books or literature or the art of writing. What carried the infection, however, I remember very clearly. At the age of eleven there fell into my hands ... a sample copy of *Saturday Night* – a weekly journal devoted exclusively to serials (then called continued stories) of the adventure, western, detective type. Of one of these stories I read the first installment, not knowing until too late that it was only the first installment ... When I asked for five cents for the next issue of *Saturday Night*, my mother, never brutal till then, said no, you mustn’t read such stories, they are not good reading. It was then I first learned that important distinction between good literature and stories that are interesting to read.<sup>39</sup>

Undeterred by his mother’s admonishments, Becker was hooked:

I did not want good literature. I wanted, more than anything else in life, the next issue of *Saturday Night*. Quite apart from the story, there was something about the journal itself ... that had for me the essential glamour of romance. From that moment my purpose in life was clear. I would be an author, a writer of stories for *Saturday Night*.<sup>40</sup>

Becker, as was his wont, exaggerated this single episode of his development. Of course he had read before the age of eleven, and he had substantial exposure to the written word at home.<sup>41</sup> Yet the message of his account is clear. His love of writing did not grow out of a desire to write important works, nor to achieve literary fame. He wanted, above all else, to write “stories that are interesting to read.” Becker arrived at this goal in his youth, and he would stick by it for the rest of his life.

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<sup>38</sup> Becker, *Detachment*, 121

<sup>39</sup> Becker, *Detachment*, 122

<sup>40</sup> Becker, *Detachment*, 122

<sup>41</sup> See p. 13

By the time he entered the University of Wisconsin, Becker's literary aspirations had further taken hold. "When I entered the university, having read a good deal but nothing systematically, I was more determined than ever to be a writer, preferably a writer of novels."<sup>42</sup> The *Wild Thoughts Notebook* reflects this. More than half of the *Notebook* is literary content: commentaries on the literary figures Becker was reading (William Dean Howells and Leo Tolstoy, among others); brief character portraits of individuals he observed in his day-to-day; and lengthier pieces of fiction.

Becker's attempts at story-telling are not particularly good. One of his longer pieces relates the experiences of Billy, a 5'2" carpenter, as he pursues an actress while trying to maintain his standing with his friends. The piece suffers from imprecise, winding descriptions ("Billy was a boy. Perhaps eighteen or twenty or possibly twenty one or two;" "an actress – a sort of a ballet dancer or singer or something or other") and clunky narration (it opens with "You must know about Billy. He is an interesting character.")<sup>43</sup> These ailments presumably arise from an attempt to write in what he perceived to be a literary fashion. The content of the story is passable enough, but is not nearly as engaging or dramatic as the fast-paced serials Becker aspired to. "Billy" is the only reoccurring character in the *Notebook*, Becker wrote two more "Billy" episodes of similar content and style.<sup>44</sup>

Becker used his observations of life in Madison, Wisconsin to hone his writing ability. The character portraits in the *Notebook* profile people that Becker (presumably) observed while

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<sup>42</sup> "Becker, *Detachment*, 124; Wilkins narrates a period at Cornell College when Becker had enrolled as a student of natural sciences (see Wilkins, 16). He views Becker's Cornell enrollment as evidence of less youthful single-purposeness than as remembered by Becker in "The Art of Writing." I believe it reflects more on career concerns, parental appeasement and the desire to graduate with an employable degree, not a fluctuating passion.

<sup>43</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, March 24<sup>th</sup> 1894

<sup>44</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, March 27<sup>th</sup> 1894 and October 3<sup>rd</sup> 1894

at Madison.<sup>45</sup> Becker's subjects were varied: a husband and wife who keep a "third-rate hotel," "an old German without friends, money, or position," a young man who "marries a crippled girl incapable of doing anything beyond a little needlework," the list goes on.<sup>46</sup> Becker dedicated a substantial portion of his time at university to studying the circumstances and behaviors of those around him, rather than engaging with his neighbors and peers directly.

The most illuminating literary content in the *Notebook* is Becker's thoughts on the writers he was reading. Young Becker read a lot, far beyond the bounds of his assigned curriculum. In the *Notebook*, he contemplated *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Une Vie*.<sup>47</sup> He recorded quotes on authorship by George Saintsbury, James Russell Lowell, Leo Tolstoy, and William Dean Howells.<sup>48</sup> Howells was particularly influential. On February 10<sup>th</sup>, 1894, Becker copied a Howells quote about found "among some old scraps":

"For this work [realistic fiction], the young writer needs experience and observation not so much of others as of himself, for ultimately his characters will all come out of himself ..."<sup>49</sup>

This quote likely appealed to Becker's introversion, but Howells' advice did not prevent Becker from paying close attention to his surroundings and neighbors. Four days later, scribbling during his history recitation, Becker mused on the same theme:

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<sup>45</sup> It is difficult to separate fact from fiction in the *Notebook*, but Becker offers some clues. The March 11<sup>th</sup> 1894 entry, in which Becker profiles a family, opens "The following is taken from actual life ..." The two entries immediately following March 11<sup>th</sup> (March 14<sup>th</sup> and March 19<sup>th</sup>) are profiles of similar content and are titled "Case 2," "Case 3"; it is reasonable to consider them factual. Determining whether or not the events recorded in the *Wild Thoughts Notebook* actually occurred is not particularly important here. For our purposes, it is sufficient that Becker found the subjects interesting enough to write about. For evaluating the factuality of the entries, I have followed this rule of thumb: long narratives are fictional; short character portraits are factual, but questionable; literary commentaries and philosophical musings are factual (i.e. Becker actually read the authors he was responding to).

<sup>46</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, March 11<sup>th</sup>, May 13<sup>th</sup>, and March 19<sup>th</sup> 1894, respectively

<sup>47</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, April 25<sup>th</sup> 1895 and December 2<sup>nd</sup> 1894, respectively

<sup>48</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, February 7<sup>th</sup> 1895, Saintsbury: "Now there is nothing more fatal to the attainment of a good style than the habit of using such stereotyped phrases and forms"; *Notebook* April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1895, Lowell: "An author should consider how far the art of writing consists in knowing what to leave in the inkstand"; December 2<sup>nd</sup> 1894 Tolstoy: "Tolstoi says that 'Une Vie' of Maupassant is incomparably his best work and thinks [it] probably [the] best French novel since Les Misérables"; Howells: October 6<sup>th</sup> 1894, February 10<sup>th</sup> 1894

<sup>49</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, February 10<sup>th</sup> 1894, quote from a Howells article which appeared in *Scribners*; Becker's bracketing



I have often wondered whether any novelist has ever been able to place himself in the life and feeling of any person. There have been made wonderful studies of human life but whether any such study has been entirely correct is an open question in my mind.<sup>50</sup>

This is one of the earliest recorded instances of Becker's struggle with the truth value of the written word. Could a writer mirror an actual state of affairs in his writing? How closely could a written account align with reality? Questions like these drove Becker to arrive at historical relativism later in his professional career, but they first arose as he strove to be a writer of realistic fiction. Also interesting is young Becker's preoccupation with the methodology of fictional realism, which foreshadowed his long-enduring interest in historical method.<sup>51</sup> Young aspiring authors who attempt to emulate the style of their literary idols are common. Youths who ponder literary theory before producing any literature themselves are rather atypical. From an early age, Becker was concerned first with the structure of concepts, second with their content.

Two qualities are apparent in young Becker's creative output: his intense observation of those around him, which at times bordered on voyeuristic; and his snotty, conceited assessments of his subjects. College-age Becker, for all his concern over proper manners, was not a very nice person. A particularly bad case occurred on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1894, in a profile of a "bicycle rider":

The latest fad among good bicycle riders is the habit of riding without touching the hands to the handles. I saw a man coming down the street today at full speed. His hands hung by his side – much the most uncomfortable position for those members which a bicycle rider can find. It was perfectly warm and nice and his hands couldn't possibly have been cold. So the only possible reason for doing so must have been – in common parlance – the desire to "show off."

Whenever a man sees a snob like that flaunting his abilities before the eyes of the public, not only in bicycle riding but in anything else as well, the most permanent feeling for that fellow is a feeling of pity for the limitations of his intellect.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, February 14<sup>th</sup> 1894; he ends the passage with "I am sorry to confess that this has been written during history recitation."

<sup>51</sup> Wilkins makes this point (see Wilkins, 31).

<sup>52</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, October 6<sup>th</sup> 1894; Perhaps here we can find some solace in his youthful naivety, having only recently been exposed to the phenomenon of "bicycle" riding.

Not the most generous estimate. And Becker's harsh criticism was not reserved for "bicycle riders" (or idiotic Christians in the library, for that matter). Fellow concert-goers annoyed Becker.<sup>53</sup> A "six-footer" sitting in the front of class annoyed Becker.<sup>54</sup> Even "true friends" seemed to annoy Becker.<sup>55</sup> "Billy," the star of Becker's short stories, earned a regal title: "stubborn, conceited, ignorant, useless, harmless, uninteresting, mistaken, foolish, Billy."<sup>56</sup> At the University of Wisconsin, Becker appeared to be heading straight off the cliff into the inky depths of misanthropy. It is easy to read these passages in the *Wild Thoughts Notebook* and picture them as the first peeps of a preeminent cynic, an incessant critic of man. Yet it is not so. Becker's later writing has its share of cynicism, yet it is always voiced with a soft smile. Reading Becker, one invariably comes away with the impression that he is "on your side," struggling right next to you with the same issues. The same sentiment is apparent in his correspondence, which he always maintained in a timely, courteous fashion. Why Becker did not dive into complete cynicism remains a mystery. Happily for us, he remained on the cliff, content with subtle criticism and relativism, for the duration of his career.

When reading the *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, it becomes apparent that Carl Becker lived in isolation for much of his undergraduate education. Becker was not at all popular in college, nor did he desire to be.<sup>57</sup> There are many entries profiling strangers he observed, but none describing time spent with friends, or even conversations that he took part in. When friendship does appear, it is not cast in a flattering light: "the trouble of having true friends is that they set for you such

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<sup>53</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, October 25 1894; also November 9<sup>th</sup> 1894

<sup>54</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, October 7<sup>th</sup> 1894

<sup>55</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, October 13<sup>th</sup> 1894; It is worth noting that many of these "annoyed Becker" passages spring from one month in 1894, perhaps young Becker held a more generous estimation of his fellow man during sunnier times in his life. But the *Notebook* holds no complimentary or amiable remarks about his peers with which to counterbalance the crummy ones.

<sup>56</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, March 24<sup>th</sup> 1894

<sup>57</sup> Becker was apparently blackballed from a social club he joined at Wisconsin, though the details are fuzzy. See Wilkins, 28

high ideals that you must certainly disappoint them: then you are in the unpleasant position of having done less than was expected of you.”<sup>58</sup> Becker was content to observe the world as it passed by. It was much the same with women – there is evidence of only a single, brief romance. In one entry, Becker dedicates a poem (the only poem in the *Notebook*) “to the one in whom I see only virtues.”<sup>59</sup> Yet things do not go well for Becker:

First darkness. Then a friend. Then light.  
Then pleasure Happiness and joy.  
These came, and then  
She went away. Then pain again and night.  
Then questions; and the wish  
It had not been.<sup>60</sup>

This is a common enough experience for a young man in college, but it is the only mention of romantic interest in the *Notebook*. Becker would have to wait several years before encountering a more substantial relationship. In the meantime, he comforted himself with the following: “it is nearly as beautiful to see others make love as it is sad to make love yourself.”<sup>61</sup> The aphorism tidily sums up young Becker’s approach to society in general – keep others at arms length and observe their actions. Another aphorism speaks to his growing commitment to scholarship: “Motto: Abstain and buy books.”<sup>62</sup>

Becker was clearly committed to the art of writing in his undergraduate days – his passion drove him to read widely and write regularly. So how did this passion contribute to his historiography? Becker’s commitment to authorship heavily influenced his later work in three ways: (1) as previously discussed, his difficulties concerning the author’s relationship to his subject first arose when attempting realistic fiction; (2) his scholarly work was always written in

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<sup>58</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, October 13 1894; on May 4<sup>th</sup> 1894 there is a passing reference to a friend, Pat.

<sup>59</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, November 9<sup>th</sup> 1894

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, (undated, after May 8<sup>th</sup> 1895); read “make love” in the older sense (i.e. dating) rather than the current sense (i.e. sexual intercourse)

<sup>62</sup> Becker, *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, (undated, after May 8<sup>th</sup> 1895); Becker’s emphasis

clean, literary style, and he would continue to write fiction throughout his career; (3) he held strong thoughts on the necessity and nature of form in all types of writing.

At Wisconsin, Becker's literary aspirations morphed into a commitment to professional history, inspired by the tutelage of Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles Haskins (more on this in the next section). Yet the drive to write well remained dominant throughout his career as a historian. He wrote several works of fiction, though none were particularly successful.<sup>63</sup> He also occasionally wrote verse, sometimes satirical, on other occasions for children. Regarding one piece of satire (now lost), his friend and fellow academic Carl Van Doren offered Becker feedback:

It seems to me that the sonnets suffer from a certain flatness now and then which leaves one questioning a little whether prose would not have been better. They have a vibrant irony, they are correct and strong and they mean a great deal. But they are excellent verse rather than good poetry in my judgment. Perhaps I would put it better to say that I think three paragraphs ... would come nearer to doing [the] job than three sonnets.<sup>64</sup>

Becker's reputation as an excellent wordsmith never extended beyond his academic work. Yet his lack of success did not deter him; he never put aside poetry or fiction, though he began to keep his efforts closer to home. For Constance Lerner, the young daughter of his friends Max and Anita Lerner, he composed whimsical nonsense verse:

Dear Kornstox,

A Bilboe and a Bobolink  
Stood sadly by the river's brink.  
Bereft of anything to say,  
The Bobolink could only blink.  
The Bilboe said: "I think the day  
Is quite serene, if somewhat grey."

The Bobolink remarked: "Let's play  
That we are ancient Beasts of Prey.  
You a Pleistocene Mink

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<sup>63</sup> *Spirit of '76, Napoleon in Utopia, King of Beasts* (which was rejected by eleven publishers)

<sup>64</sup> Van Doren to Becker, March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1922 Box 8

And I a Prehistoric Jay  
Will Be.” The Bilboe said: “No Gink  
Has ever thought so nice a Think.”<sup>65</sup>

Becker delighted in writing fiction throughout his life. Further, his desire to write well permeated all of his more serious, nonfiction work. Becker ruthlessly revised everything he wrote. The manuscript drafts of works he was preparing for publication are replete with crossing-outs, scribbles above the line and in the margin, and re-typings of lengthy passages.<sup>66</sup> Amazingly, in spite of his intense editorial process, Becker consistently turned his material over to publishers before deadline, a testament both to his discipline and dedication to continually improving what he wrote.<sup>67</sup>

So what did writing well consist of? In his essay “The Art of Writing,” Becker criticized the grammarian definition of good writing, and instead proposed his own:

What I really asked the Rhetoric [textbooks] was, “What must one do in order to learn to write well?” The Rhetorics all, without, exception, replied: “Good writing must be clear, forceful, and elegant.” ... The truth is that the Rhetorics gave me the run around. I asked for a method, they gave me a definition. It would have been better, of course, if the definition had been sound ... A safer definition would be: “Good writing is writing that fully and effectively conveys the fact, the idea, or the emotion which the writer wishes to convey.”<sup>68</sup>

And what method should be used to learn how to write well? Becker, having been cheated by the Rhetorics, gave his own advice:

These are then the three essentials – to have an irrepressible desire to write, to be always reading with discrimination, and to always be writing as well.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Becker to Constance Lerner, November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1931, in Kammen, 150

<sup>66</sup> Charlotte Watkins Smith, “Carl Becker: The Historian As Literary Craftsman,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (July, 1952): 310

<sup>67</sup> Smith, “Literary Craftsman,” 310

<sup>68</sup> Becker, *Detachment*, 125-127; aligns with Ben Franklin’s definition: “That is well wrote which is best adapted to obtain the object of the writer.”

<sup>69</sup> Becker, *Detachment*, 131

This was a program quite similar to the one he himself followed at the University of Wisconsin. Becker was always mindful of the necessity of writing well, and followed this outline throughout his career.

Although he prized clean, clear writing, Becker disliked the idea of literary style. For Becker, the word “style” actually referred to form, a concept intertwined with content. He addressed this relationship in “The Art of Writing:”

... it is inconceivable that any one should discuss the art of writing without once mentioning the word *style*.

Very well. I will mention it. *Style*. How do you like it? I don't like it at all. I like it almost as little as I like the word *artistry*. I dislike the word *style* because it carries over from common usage connotations that are irrelevant and misleading in literary discourse. It is so easy to think of style in writing as we think of stylish clothes... The word tends to fix the attention on what is superficial and decorative in writing, upon verbal felicity and the neat phrase; whereas in reality the foundation of good writing is organic structure – logical arrangement and continuity in the sentence, the paragraph, the chapter, the book as a whole. All this is a matter, not of happy phrasing alone or primarily, but of clear and logical thinking. Good form, in short, is a matter of mastering the content.<sup>70</sup>

This notion – the idea that form and content are inseparably linked – is one Becker truly took to heart. It is present in all of his writing – reviews, lectures, essays, and book. Becker understood clear writing to be a function of clear thinking, and he took special effort to ensure that his writing presented its subject matter, which was often abstract and complex, as plainly as possible. The simplicity of Becker's writing earned him a wide audience and praise from his peers, and it is the reason his work remains fresh and accessible today. All of this resulted from a deep conviction in the importance of literary form in every written genre, a conviction that took hold during his early days at Wisconsin.

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<sup>70</sup> Becker, *Detachment*, 131-2

*Mentors – Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles Homer Haskins*

With the extant evidence, we can draw a reasonable thumbnail sketch of who the young Carl Becker was, but much of the picture is missing.<sup>71</sup> From the *Wild Thoughts Notebook*, we have snapshots of Becker in college: an aspiring writer, practicing his chosen craft; a dutiful student, diligently working through his assignments;<sup>72</sup> a lonely, observant young man, constantly questioning, occasionally leveling caustic judgments against his peers. Becker the undergraduate could have gone many ways – on to become a famous novelist, a contentious atheist, or a quiet recluse. Instead he went on to become an eminent historian, and, more interesting for us, a historiographer. Why did he choose this path? Becker followed the example of his two most-admired teachers – Charles Homer Haskins and Frederick Jackson Turner.

Before we proceed in chronicling the relationship of Becker and his mentors, I must address a contention made by a Beckerian predecessor. At the beginning of his chapter on Becker and Turner, Burleigh Wilkins attributes a portion of Becker’s thinking to the economist Richard T. Ely, who taught at Wisconsin in the 1890s.<sup>73</sup> Wilkins aligns Ely’s struggle with evangelism with Becker’s own religious difficulties: “It might be assumed – despite the absence of direct proof – that Ely helped, however indirectly, to show Becker that the evangelical spirit could be directed toward ends more satisfying than the search for evidences of Original Sin.”<sup>74</sup> This alignment is unfounded and bizarre. Becker took courses with Ely, who also advised his economics minor during graduate study, but evidence of a relationship stops there.<sup>75</sup> Wilkins knows this: “nowhere in his writings did Becker mention Ely,” but dedicates about two pages to

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<sup>71</sup> None of Becker’s undergraduate coursework survives. No letters from his undergraduate years survive either.

<sup>72</sup> Becker was always a good student, but not an exceptional one during his first years at Wisconsin. He earned a B average in his freshman year, which improved to straight A’s by his senior year. See Smith’s *Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion*, 7 for further discussion of his scholastic record.

<sup>73</sup> Wilkins, 36-38

<sup>74</sup> Wilkins, 37

<sup>75</sup> Wilkins, 37; Charlotte Watkins Smith, *Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956), 15.

the posited relationship regardless.<sup>76</sup> The claim grows stranger as Wilkins acknowledges that “[Becker] may have been unaware of any connection between his literary problems of character study and Ely’s none-too-inspiring lectures on the character of economic and social institutions.”<sup>77</sup> As we will see, Becker would later reflect quite closely on his intellectual growth; he never considered Ely as a significant influence on his development. Wilkins’ claim that Ely showed Becker other uses for the “evangelical spirit,” then, is purely speculative and likely inaccurate, an irregularity in Wilkins’ generally sound study.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I believe that Becker’s historiography was an original idea. It grew up organically with Becker on the Iowa farm, and began to sprout alongside him at university. His teachers, peers, and critics all affected his thought, yet the thinking itself was rooted firmly in Becker and all that Becker was. It is worth reaffirming this point before moving forward, for Turner (especially Turner) and Haskins had a profound influence on Becker. It can be tempting to view Becker as very much a “normal boy,” going along his normal way until thunderstruck by Turner’s shining example. But this, I think, is too pretty a picture. Becker had been piling up bundles of raw thought-material long before encountering any professor worthy of respect.<sup>78</sup> Turner and Haskins were simply the sparks that set them afire.

Becker’s mentors benefitted him in three significant ways: (1) as a result of working with Turner and Haskins, Becker committed to the professional study of history; (2) after entering the academy after them, Becker kept in close contact with his mentors, maintaining relationships that would prove intellectually and professionally fruitful; and (3) as dramatically phrased above,

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<sup>76</sup> Wilkins, 38; if Becker wrote to Ely (or vice versa), the correspondence does not survive. Nor is Ely mentioned in any later work or in the *Wild Thoughts Notebook* (to be fair, Becker mentioned no academic influences in the *Notebook*).

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Near the beginning of his playful essay “On Being a Professor,” Becker recalls from his childhood “a lean little old man, in ancient shiny frock coat, who came every Spring to prepare our firewood... In fact, the man was thought to be mildly demented; and so, by some popular instinct, everyone called him ‘Professor.’”; see Becker, *Detachment*, 92-93



Turner and Haskins strongly influenced Becker's thinking about the nature of history, and would later encourage and affirm his relativist position. Turner and Haskins were distinctly different, and they merit separate consideration. In what follows, I will address the Turner-Becker and Haskins-Becker relationships separately, working through each of the above points in turn. We will start with Turner, who had the greater influence on Becker and who has the bulk of extant evidence on his side.

Happily, Becker gave us a firsthand account of his early relationship with Turner. In the winter of 1925-1926, Becker was invited to contribute a piece on his teacher and friend to a collection of biography entitled "American Masters of Social Science."<sup>79</sup> This assignment resulted in one of Becker's best short works, the essay "Frederick Jackson Turner." Becker's preparations for the piece generated an intensely intimate exchange of letters between student and teacher. This essay and the letters that surround it offer a valuable window into Becker's relationship with his chief mentor.

Becker opened his essay with a narrative of his first days at Wisconsin. Becker, being both the original source and the better stylist, will now take over:

I went to the University of Wisconsin (in 1893 it was) for the same reason that many boys go to one college rather than another – because a high school friend of mine, whose cousin or something had "been at Madison," was going there. As youth will, I at once endowed the place, which I had never seen and had only recently heard of, with a romantic glamour. Was not Madison a distant and large city? (I am speaking now of a prairie country boy who had never ventured from his small town into the world so wide). And was it not located on a great body of water, a lake eight miles in diameter, no less? One other bit of knowledge contributed to the splendor that was Wisconsin. On the faculty of that University there was a man whom a young lawyer in my town had belauded and bragged about, and familiarly referred to as "old Freddie Turner."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> See Box 8 for the 1925-26 letters

<sup>80</sup> Becker, *Everyman*, 191; Becker's simple recounting of his motive for attending Wisconsin, "because a high school friend of mine ... was going there," should not be given much weight. He made no mention of his abortive year at Cornell College (Becker never mentioned his year at Cornell College), nor of the death of his cousin and close friend Leonard Sarvay. His brief account here can be attributed to narrative expediency and his penchant for self-deprecation.

The young lawyer had piqued starry-eyed Becker's imagination:

"Is he old"? I asked, picturing the long gray locks of a Faust before the devil comes in the spotlight.

"Oh no, not *old*. We just call him that, I don't know why – just a rough way of showing boyish admiration without being sentimental about it, I suppose."

"What does he teach?"

"Well, he teaches American history. But it's not what he teaches, the subject I mean. The subject doesn't matter. It's what he is, the personality and all that sort of thing. It's something he gives you, inspiration, new ideas, a fresh light on things in general. It's something he makes you want to do or be. I don't remember much American history, but I'll never forget that man Turner, old Freddie Turner."<sup>81</sup>

With this tidbit in mind, Becker headed off to Wisconsin, "clear about one thing – I would take a course with old Freddie Turner."<sup>82</sup>

Becker spotted Turner soon after arriving in Madison:

... the man was pointed out to me, on the campus, going somewhere in a hurry, loaded down with an immense leather portfolio bulging with books and notes; belatedly hurrying up the hill to class ... Of course he wasn't old – thirty-three or thereabouts at that time. To a youth of eighteen, men of thirty-three, professors at all events, might more often than not *seem* old; were at least likely to convey the impression of having settled all disturbing questions ... No such impression was conveyed by "that man Turner" beating it up the hill at 10:02 A.M. Even to a boy of eighteen there was something essentially youthful in the rounded lines of the short compact figure.<sup>83</sup>

Becker passed his freshman year without any further exposure to Turner. In his sophomore year, he enrolled in Turner's entry-level course and approached the young professor straightaway:

Well I remember the opening day of the second year when I stood in line by his desk, waiting to ask him a question ... There I stood, and presently he turned to me with the quick upward flash of blue eyes that seemed to lift and throw over and through me a shaft of live light. I seemed, dumb shy youth that I was, to stand fully revealed in the light of those extraordinary eyes ... Haltingly I asked my foolish question, and was answered. The answer was nothing, the words were nothing, but the voice – the voice was

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<sup>81</sup> Becker, *Everyman*, 191-92; Becker's emphasis. Curious that "a prairie country boy," who had "never read a book" by the age of eleven, should imagine Faust when told about an old professor. This is a good example both of Becker's persistent use literary style and the unreliable details in his recollections.

<sup>82</sup> Becker, *Everyman*, 192

<sup>83</sup> Becker, *Everyman*, 192-193; Becker's emphasis. Again note an inconsistency in the details in his account: Becker was 20, not 18, when he arrived at Wisconsin.

everything: a voice not deep but full, rich, vibrant, and musically cadenced; such a voice as you would never grow weary of, so warm and intimate and human it was.<sup>84</sup>

The introduction hit Becker hard; Turner's impact was immediate and wordlessly powerful.

Turner's spirit, his aura, his "indefinable *charm*," was attraction enough; his field of study did not much matter.<sup>85</sup> Becker was an instant devotee, "a devoted disciple and questionless admirer of 'old Freddie Turner.'"<sup>86</sup>

Yet Becker's dedication did not yet extend to Turner's field of study. As the young lawyer had told Becker back in Iowa, "it's not what he teaches ... The subject doesn't matter."<sup>87</sup> Turner's initial impact was that of celebrity; a rock star (as much as any professor can be considered a rock star) with blue eyes that threw shafts of live light. Becker was not alone in his admiration; he began to follow Turner along with "I know not how many other lads of nineteen."<sup>88</sup> History, not nearly as appealing as Turner, took longer to grow on Becker. "The word held no blandishments for me ... A dull subject, History."<sup>89</sup> But Becker was determined to follow his newfound idol, an idol who happened to be a historian:

Even then I didn't study history. I took courses in history, and in due time I took Turner's "junior course" in American history. But I didn't study history, not really; because I didn't know how to study it. Remembering what things happened at what times – that was what studying history meant to me then. Learning things out of a book.<sup>90</sup>

Young Becker, so set on becoming an author, had not yet conceived of just how broadly the term 'history' could be taken. But Turner was there to help:

But if I didn't study history that year, I was infected with the desire to do so. This of course was Turner's fault, not mine (Haskins' fault too, by the way ...) For it was true, as my lawyer friend said, that Turner had a singular capacity for making you want to do and be something ... Fascinated by the man, I attended to his every gesture and expression,

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<sup>84</sup> Becker, *Everyman*, 194

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*; Becker's emphasis

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, 191

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, 194; Becker was 20 or 21 at the time, not 19.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, 192

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, 194

listened to everything he said ... The implication of the whole performance was of something vital being under consideration ... The implication as that we ... were searching for something, ferreting out hidden secrets.<sup>91</sup>

For the first time, Becker began to see history as something beautiful, something much more than book learning. Turner was practicing something grand, an all-encompassing search, an adventure of the mind. This search was not contained to the facts, it was beyond them:

There was something concealed there, in and behind the facts, some problem that concerned humanity at large waiting to be solved. The implication was that we might, on our own account, turn over the dead facts once more, on the chance of finding something, something the others had missed.<sup>92</sup>

Here, hints of Becker's historiography can be seen, hints of history as a continual reinterpretation of past events, rather than a collection of permanent "contributions to knowledge." Keep in mind that Becker wrote this essay in 1925 and 1926, long after he had strongly asserted his historiographic position. This position informed almost all of his writing, and it could be that here Becker was superimposing his established theory over his early discovery of history. This superimposition may exist in some degree, but the genuine influence of Turner on Becker's thought is not dismissed so easily. Under Turner, Becker began to better understand the academic profession, viewing Turner and his other professors not as teachers, but as thinkers. This shift in viewpoint was profoundly important to the aspiring novelist:

From the moment Turner ceased to figure in my mind as a teacher, I began to learn something from him. Not "teacher" but "historian" he was, better still "author," whose main occupation it was, not to teach us, but to be deeply engaged in researches preliminary to the writing of notable books.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*, 195; Becker was apparently fond of referring to his passions as "infections," as he did here with history and earlier regarding writing.

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*, 195-196

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, 196-197

Not only was Turner a man worth admiring, he was a writer as well! Young Becker had truly found a role model. Not a writer of popular novels, or for *Saturday Night*, but a writer nonetheless. Observing Turner the author, Becker arrived at a new understanding of history:

... I got a new idea of history. It was after all no convention agreed upon to be learned by rote, but just the infinitely varied action and thought of men who in past times had lived and struggled and died for means or great objects. It was in short an aspect of life itself ... Who would not like to study history as Turner studied it? And write about it as he would write about it?<sup>94</sup>

With this new view, Becker was able to align his literary aspirations with the historical profession. Turner enabled young Becker to pursue a literary career in history. At the close of the first section of his “Turner” essay, Becker explicitly credited his decision to become a historian to Turner:

And so in this eventful junior year I brought out my tiny little wagon and fumblingly hitched it to that bright particular star. Procuring quantities of paper and manilla envelopes, I began ‘pen in hand’ to study history; with patient, plodding abandon pouring over ... mouldy, crumbling old tome[s] ... which Turner, by some species of white magic, had invested with color and charm.<sup>95</sup>

So ends Becker’s account of his introduction to Turner. The essay was well-received, both as a tribute to Turner and as a self-portrait of Becker. After reading the published piece, Turner wrote to Becker:

But I do appreciate most deeply your chapter. If, at times, I feel that you are writing your youthful enthusiasms over finding history, rather than painting the man as he really is, (or was), I ... seem to see the young and ardent adventurer “beyond the edge of cultivation,” and I get a real thrill from the evidence that, at least, I had a part – a too generously recognized part – in shaping such careers as yours, and by companionship, not by schoolmaster’s drills.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, 199

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, 199-200

<sup>96</sup> Turner to Becker, May 14<sup>th</sup> 1927, p. 1-2 Box 8; Turner’s emphasis

Becker's friend Felix Frankfurter (who would later become an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court) made a similar point: "You thought you were 'doing' Turner; you also did Becker!"<sup>97</sup> In reflecting back on his undergraduate days, Becker not only revealed Turner as a role model and mentor, but also traced his own journey – as Turner put it, a "young and ardent adventurer, 'beyond the edge of cultivation,'" seeking to face things on his own terms, to see them as they were.

Becker's correspondence with Turner serves to supplement his narrative account of their relationship. The first surviving piece of correspondence between the two dates from 1896, and Becker remained in contact with Turner until the latter's death in 1932. In 1896, after completing his undergraduate degree in three years, Becker enrolled in graduate studies at Wisconsin.<sup>98</sup> Becker had initially wanted to minor in literature (in line with his authorial ambitions), but Turner advised him against it:

The old union between history and literature is now broken in all the growing colleges ... I should not advise you to make a first minor of literature ... You might very well make a second minor in literature.<sup>99</sup>

Instead, Turner advised a minor in economics or political science, "a good general knowledge of both [is] essential to historical study, if your work is not to become dilettante."<sup>100</sup> Turner continued to regularly advise Becker and write on his behalf as he pursued further graduate study (two years at Wisconsin, followed by a fellowship at Columbia, then a period of transient teaching and a much-delayed doctoral exam back at Wisconsin).<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Frankfurter to Becker 1927, quoted in Wilkins, 44 n. 28

<sup>98</sup> Wilkins, 19 and 46

<sup>99</sup> Turner to Becker, July 3<sup>rd</sup> 1896 p. 2 Box 7

<sup>100</sup> Turner to Becker, July 3<sup>rd</sup> 1896 p. 3 Box 7

<sup>101</sup> See Wilkins, 49-67

At this juncture, I believe Turner's role in pushing Becker towards history and their ongoing relationship, my points (1) and (2), have been sufficiently demonstrated. Point (3) remains: to show how Turner influenced Becker's historiography directly.

In May 1910, Becker wrote revealing letter to Turner. Becker had recently finished his groundbreaking essay "Detachment and the Writing of History," though it would not be published until October.<sup>102</sup> Becker took special care with this letter, writing a draft out in full before sending it to Turner. In the letter, Becker echoed many of the sentiments he would publish 17 years later. Recalling one of Turner's classes at Wisconsin, Becker wrote:

I remember that you drew a diagram on the board to illustrate the problem, and that you said you hadn't a logical mind, which one ought to have if one wants to be positive about such a question [referring to a distinction between 'fact' and 'right' which we will return to later]. I never forgot that remark, and have since pondered, in a desultory way, the question of the logical and the historical mind, and have come to the conclusion that logic and history are two distinct ways (and perhaps the only ways) of apprehending reality, history being, however, the more comprehensive, since there is no logic of history but a very interesting history of logic.<sup>103</sup>

This is direct evidence of Turner's lectures sparking Becker's thoughts; a single remark in class led Becker to begin pondering a full epistemological schema. Becker followed with another example of this:

Another saying of yours, several times repeated, I remember: "History is the self-consciousness of humanity." That, at the time, meant absolutely nothing to me, but the saying must have been working all these years in the fringe of my consciousness, for I have recently hazarded in print the thesis that "we must have a past that is the product of all the present." This, I take it, is the same as saying that history is the self-consciousness of humanity.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Becker, *Detachment*, 3

<sup>103</sup> Becker to Turner, May 15<sup>th</sup> 1910 Box 7; I suspect this is a draft copy because the original resides in the Becker Papers (mostly composed of incoming correspondence and photocopied outgoing correspondence), and Becker practiced a variety of forms of address in the bottom right corner of the sheet (i.e. My dear Professor, My dear Professor Turner, etc.). See Smith, *On History*, 46-47 for a full transcription of this letter.

<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*; Becker recorded two versions of this thesis: (1) "history, the past as we know it, is the 'product of all the present.'" which Becker crossed out in favor of (2) "we must have a past that is the product of all the present."

I am not sure if a past that is “the product of all the present” is precisely the same as history being “the self-consciousness of humanity,” but both phrasings convey a similar idea. Again, Turner had implanted an idea “in the fringe of [Becker’s] consciousness,” which Becker later worked through and developed.

Although Turner exerted a strong influence over Becker’s thinking, he never endorsed the relativist position as whole-heartedly as Becker would. Turner was never as interested in historiography as Becker; he was firmly a historian, whereas Becker often blurred the line between philosophy and history in his writing. Becker put the notion nicely in his “Turner” essay:

... I couldn’t help seeing that Turner was so wholly absorbed in his work that he hadn’t time to think of anything else, not even of the necessity of being objective. He was “disinterested” because he was so interested in the object before him that he forgot, for the time being, to be interested in anything else; he was “objective” because he was so genuinely curious about that object, desired with such singleness of purpose to know it for the sake of knowing it, that his mind was empty, for the time being, of all other objects.<sup>105</sup>

This same sort of disinterest applied to Becker, he was famous for his highly-detached narrative style.<sup>106</sup> However, Becker could never be satisfied with knowing something “for the sake of knowing it.” He was continually curious about the nature and purpose of historical knowledge. This is a key difference between Becker and Turner.

However, despite Turner’s hyper-interested objective outlook, he was by no means a scientific historian.<sup>107</sup> He is frequently classed with the “New” or “Progressive” historians.<sup>108</sup> I think it is more useful here to interpret Turner historiographically as a transitional figure between

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<sup>105</sup> Becker, *Everyman*, 209

<sup>106</sup> In *Progress and Power*, Becker endeavored to narrate the whole of human progress from the perspective of “the Olympian Heights where the Greek Gods lived: the Greek Gods were near enough to observe the activities of men, yet far enough removed to take an objective view of their fate.” See *Progress and Power* p.20

<sup>107</sup> See p. 59-60 for a discussion of scientific history



the positivistic scientism prevalent in his generation and the radical relativism advanced by Becker and Beard. When considering the nature of historical study, Turner emphasized its social aspects and advocated for integration with other social science methodologies. Writing to Becker in the 1920s, Turner stressed “the conception of history as a complex of all the social sciences. The conception of the Oneness of the thing. As you intimate, this is a rather paralyzing conception ... But it does help to know that these subjects are tied together.”<sup>109</sup> Turner remained largely objective in his historiography, when he paused to think about historiography. He never ventured as far as Becker did into relativism. Turner provided Becker with an example of what a historian could be, and his guidance pointed Becker down the road to writing sound professional history. Yet once set down the path, Becker followed his own vision of what history was, and what it might be used for. Becker concluded his 1910 letter to Turner with a good summation of his outlook:

To me, nothing can be duller than historical facts, and nothing more interesting than the service they can be made to render in the effort to solve the everlasting riddle of human existence. It is from you, my dear Professor Turner, more than from anyone else, that I have learned to distinguish historical facts from their uses.<sup>110</sup>

With that, let us lay Turner to rest and consider his compatriot at Wisconsin, Charles Homer Haskins.

Charles Haskins was something of a prodigy. Born in 1870, he was only two and a half years older than Becker. When he was five, his father began to teach him Latin. Ancient Greek soon followed. He graduated from Johns Hopkins at the age of sixteen, and began teaching there when he was nineteen.<sup>111</sup> In 1890, Turner helped Haskins secure an appointment as an instructor

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<sup>109</sup> Turner to Becker December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1925 p. 3-4 Box 8

<sup>110</sup> Becker to Turner, May 15<sup>th</sup> 1910 Box 7

<sup>111</sup> Charles Homer Haskins, *The Rise of Universities* (Ithaca: Cornell Paperbacks, 1965), v

at the University of Wisconsin.<sup>112</sup> Two years later, at the age of twenty-two, Haskins was appointed to the chair of European History, a position he would hold for the next ten years. In 1902, Haskins was invited to Harvard, where he held various chairs of European History until his retirement in 1931.<sup>113</sup>

Unfortunately, only scant evidence of Becker's relationship with Haskins survives.<sup>114</sup> Unlike Turner, Becker never honored Haskins with a dedicatory essay. Further complicating things is the dearth of secondary scholarship on Haskins in general. Today, Charles Haskins is memorialized by the Haskins Society (dedicated to medieval studies), a lecture series titled "A Life of Learning" hosted by the American Council of Learned Societies (of which Haskins was the first chairman), a Wikipedia page of moderate length, and little else.<sup>115</sup> He has not been the subject of a biography or a substantial paper. This lack of scholarship makes it difficult to piece together Haskins' life outside of his work, much less his relationship with Carl Becker.<sup>116</sup>

But all is not lost. Haskins and Becker maintained a regular correspondence over the course of their careers; many of these letters are preserved in the Becker papers. In addition, Becker dropped some tantalizing hints that Haskins had a powerful effect on his thinking. In what follows, I will outline the Becker-Haskins relationship as best as the evidence allows. This treatment will be less involved than the above analysis of the Becker-Turner relationship.

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<sup>112</sup> Wilkins, 44

<sup>113</sup> F. M. Powicke, "Charles Homer Haskins", *The English Historical Review* 52, no. 208 (October 1937): 649.

<sup>114</sup> Curiously, Wilkins' chapter on Becker's mentors is devoted almost entirely to Frederick Jackson Turner. Haskins receives minimal treatment, with only half a paragraph devoted specifically to his influence on Becker, along with some appearances in passing (including one rather snide reference to "the young medievalist, Charles Homer Haskins, who had a mind too fine for theories"). See Wilkins, 38, 43. Smith's work is similarly lacking, though her treatment is less thorough throughout.

<sup>115</sup> <http://haskinssociety.org/>; <http://www.acls.org/programs/single.aspx?id=160>; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Homer\\_Haskins](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Homer_Haskins)

<sup>116</sup> The Charles Homer Haskins Papers reside at the Princeton University Library; they do not appear to have been fully exploited, or even systematically worked through.

In order to highlight one of Becker's tantalizing tidbits, let us return to a passage already discussed from his essay "Frederick Jackson Turner:"

But if I didn't study history that year, I was infected with the desire to do so. This of course was Turner's fault, not mine (Haskins' fault too, by the way; and if I were writing chiefly about myself instead of Turner, which it may be thought I am doing if I don't watch out, there would be much to be said about Haskins.)<sup>117</sup>

It is a shame that Becker was not writing about himself; such an account would powerfully inform our understanding of his early life. Becker rarely wrote about his past; when he did, it took the form of smiling self-deprecation or misty reminiscence. It is thus up to us to piece together his story.

Out of all of his teachers, Becker was closest to Turner and Haskins. Though he studied with Herbert Osgood, John Burgess, and James Harvey Robinson during his fellowship at Columbia, he did not keep in regular contact with them in later years. In later life, Becker did not recall Robinson, Osgood, Burgess, or any of his other instructors at Columbia as particularly influential to his thought. In contrast, Becker attributed a good deal of influence to both Turner and Haskins. The dedication of Becker's finest book, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, reads:

To  
Charles Homer Haskins  
and  
Frederick Jackson Turner  
His Friends and Teachers  
The Author Dedicates This Book  
In Gratitude and Affection<sup>118</sup>

*The Heavenly City* was published in 1932, the year of Turner's death.<sup>119</sup> Haskins had retired from Harvard in ill health the year before.<sup>120</sup> Aware of the age and condition of his mentors,

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<sup>117</sup> Becker, *Everyman*, 195

<sup>118</sup> Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), dedication.

Becker made a point to acknowledge their impact on his development. The significance of this dedication grows as we note that *The Heavenly City* was the only book Becker dedicated to friends or mentors.<sup>121</sup>

Separating the specific aspects of influence to attribute to Turner and Haskins is much more difficult than establishing their roles as Becker's main mentors. The separation is particularly problematic given the unequal distribution of the surviving documents. Given Becker's 1910 letter to and 1926 essay on Turner, we can say quite easily that Turner had a greater effect than Haskins. But how did their influences differ qualitatively? What was unique to Haskins and what to Turner?

The waters are further muddied by the courtesy and modesty of the trio. In a 1920 letter to Becker, Turner attributed much of the effect to Haskins:

I can easily understand what Haskins did for you in the way of an ideal of critical scholarship, for my own historical master, Allen, has always looked over my own shoulder, and stirred my historical conscience.<sup>122</sup>

Haskins, on the other hand, gave most of the credit to Turner and Becker himself.<sup>123</sup>

Dividing influence by degree and kind is an insoluble problem given the source material available. We will have to content ourselves with saying that Becker was profoundly affected by his studies under both Turner and Haskins at Wisconsin. Turner was Becker's chief role model;

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<sup>119</sup> The book was written and dedicated before Turner's death, see Davidson to Becker, February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1932 Box 8 and Garrison to Becker, March 13<sup>th</sup> 1932, Box 8. Turner died on March 14<sup>th</sup> 1932.

<sup>120</sup> Haskins, v

<sup>121</sup> Becker only occasionally dedicated his books, and very rarely dedicated books to specific people. He dedicated *Progress and Power* to his wife: "To Maude Hepworth Ranney, who possess and has needed forbearance and understanding." Becker's dedication of his essay collection, *Everyman His Own Historian*, is also notable: "Dedicated with gratitude and affection to the young people, some not so young now, who have assisted the author in clarifying his ideas: partly by listening with unfailing amiability to his expoundings, chiefly by avoiding the error of Hway, a pupil of Confucius: *Hway*, said Confucius, *is of no assistance to me; there is nothing that I say in which he does not delight.*"

<sup>122</sup> Turner to Becker, October 26 1920 p.2 Box XX; Turner is referring to his own mentor, William Francis Allen, who oversaw Turner's graduate work at Wisconsin.

<sup>123</sup> Haskins to Becker, May 23 1927 in Wilkins, 43

Haskins took second place. Becker remained in close contact with both for the length of their careers, and honored the two of them equally in a dedication decades later.

*Columbia and Beyond – The Early Years of Professionalism*

“With the novitiate ended, one took the full vows.”<sup>124</sup> Having committed to historical study by the end of his undergraduate career, Becker enrolled in graduate studies at Wisconsin. There he remained under the tutelage of Haskins and Turner for two years, until he won a fellowship at Columbia. In his letter of recommendation, Haskins noted Becker’s “quick appreciation, patience, thoroughness, and good judgment.”<sup>125</sup> Turner echoed these sentiments in a similarly-purposed letter to Harvard: “He is a young man of exceptional ability; clear headed, a thorough student, and equipped with a large part of our historical sources.”<sup>126</sup> Tellingly, Turner made special note of Becker’s powers of “literary expression.”<sup>127</sup>

On October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1898, Becker enrolled in Columbia’s Political Science program, signing up for courses in constitutional law, international law, and both European and American history.<sup>128</sup> At Columbia, Becker studied with John W. Burgess, Herbert L. Osgood, and James Harvey Robinson. In his biography, Wilkins dedicates a long chapter to Becker’s year at Columbia, giving substantial background information on each of these thinkers and a profile of the intellectual climate of the university overall.<sup>129</sup> Becker was indeed exposed to a high

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<sup>124</sup> Becker, *Everyman*, 200

<sup>125</sup> Haskins to Ely, February 23<sup>rd</sup> 1898 p.2 Box 7

<sup>126</sup> Turner to Hart, March 5<sup>th</sup> 1897 p.1 Box 7; Becker did not receive the fellowship to Harvard, instead he remained on at Wisconsin for another year.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.*, p.2

<sup>128</sup> Wilkins, 49

<sup>129</sup> Wilkins 49-68, his chapter on Columbia (19 pages) is longer than his chapter on Turner (12 pages); as noted previously, Haskins receives little mention in the biography. Becker himself is curiously absent from the Columbia chapter, which focuses more on Becker’s teachers than their student.

concentration of intellectual capital at Columbia (as far as such as thing can be measured), but Wilkins' treatment overweights the importance of his year there. Becker did not remain in close contact with his Columbia professors after leaving the school, and he rarely mentioned any of them in later reflections. This, of course, does not discount the possible impact that the Columbia milieu may have instilled in Becker, but it does confine any assertion of such impact to the speculative realm. Here, I say simply that Becker had amassed all the prerequisites of his historiography by the end of his time at Wisconsin. The raw material was all there: his interest in literary form and its relation to function, his skepticism about religion and testimony, his admiration of Turner and conviction that history was (or should be, at least) "good for something." Over the next decade, Becker would sort through these raw pieces until assembling them into a coherent statement in 1910.

"At the very least," Wilkins says, "Columbia might serve as a kind of finishing school, to round off some of the rough edges of the Mid-West."<sup>130</sup> On this, I am with him. As a professional historian, Becker always appeared quite "finished:" a polished writer, readily conversant with most every Enlightenment thinker, coyly critiquing his fellows. It is continually surprising to reflect on his humble origins in Black Hawk County, Iowa.<sup>131</sup> Also surprising is his lack of travel: Becker went only once to Europe, in his middle age.<sup>132</sup> I think we can safely attribute to Becker's polish both to his vast reading and his years of studying and teaching in the East. Becker avoided any accusation of provincialism by a wide margin; this too is thanks to his time at Columbia. Yet to push its influence further is a little much, I think.

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<sup>130</sup> Wilkins, 49

<sup>131</sup> Smith put it quotably: "How could a man who never ceased to look like an Iowa farmer write with the urbanity of a Lord Chesterfield, as well as with the pithiness of a Benjamin Franklin?" See Smith, *On History*, 132. I had no idea who Lord Chesterfield was, and thus decided to confine Smith's quote to the footnotes to prevent the possibility of similar stumbling on your part.

<sup>132</sup> From June to September 1924; See Kammen, 89-100 for letters Becker wrote to his wife and son while abroad

Intellectually, Becker is frequently aligned with James Harvey Robinson under the aegis of the New History.<sup>133</sup> In general, Becker is often classed as a New Historian, or a Pragmatist. I do not think these classifications are particularly useful in understanding his thought. Becker, who personally disliked the tendency to label thinkers and group them broadly, often called on Robinson to actually write some New History, rather than just write about it.<sup>134</sup> Becker also dogged Robinson about the notion of “useful” history and assumptions implicit in the New History’s doctrine of progress. This is all intended to distance Becker from Robinson, not to discount Robinson’s effect entirely. In 1937, Becker reflected on his seminar with Robinson at Columbia:

In 1898, I enrolled in James Harvey Robinson’s seminar in eighteenth-century thought, which met one evening a week in the old Columbia library. The professor talked so informally and entertainingly that taking notes seemed out of place. He had a wit, a dry, mordant humor, and a fund of striking, unacademic bits of information which I had not found in textbooks or formal histories; and there was a sadness in the countenance, a quality, half plaintiveness half resignation, in the voice that made even simple statements of fact amusing or illuminating, or both.<sup>135</sup>

In reflecting back, here as with Turner, Becker emphasized humanness over cerebral content. Becker was not so interested in speaking about Turner’s frontier thesis as he was about a “flash of blue eyes” and a “shaft of live light.” Likewise, he was more interested in Robinson’s voice, with its half-plaintive, half-resigned quality than he was in any of Robinson’s proposals to reform history. It is clear from this passage that Becker respected Robinson and found his seminar valuable. What is less clear is the extent to which Robinson shaped Becker’s thought. If Becker received any tinge of pragmatic thinking early on, he would have gotten it from

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<sup>133</sup> See Smith, *On History*, 65; Strout, *The Pragmatic Revolt*, 39; Wilkins, 56-63; White also identifies Robinson as a likely source of Becker’s thought, and points his reader to the same passage of Wilkins

<sup>134</sup> A word from Becker on labels: “All these conventional labels, having little to do with ideas or the quality of a man’s work, seem to me quite useless for purposes of historical criticism. To say of any historian, ancient or modern, that he is scientific, or literary, or patriotic, tells me little that I care to know...”; Becker, *Everyman*, 135

<sup>135</sup> Carl Becker, review of *The Human Comedy* by James Harvey Robinson, *The Nation* 144, issue 2 (1937): 48-50.

Robinson, who had studied with William James at Harvard.<sup>136</sup> Yet as we will discuss later, pragmatism did not have a direct effect on Becker's thinking.<sup>137</sup> Robinson, then, was a good and useful teacher to Becker, but did not affect his historiography in any remarkable way.

After his year at Columbia, Becker took a teaching position at Pennsylvania State College. Becker taught there for two years before accepting a one-year appointment at Dartmouth.<sup>138</sup> Teaching did not come easily to Becker at first, and he would never grow to like it.

Soon after starting at Pennsylvania State College, Turner advised: "I know you will have a hard time of it this year, yet if you weather these seas you will be a more experienced sailor and will *find* yourself."<sup>139</sup> Haskins had words of warning regarding Dartmouth: "... the Dartmouth boys are rather lively ... [you] might find the disciplinary side of the work less pleasant."<sup>140</sup> Becker weathered the seas of Dartmouth, but he soon sought calmer waters.

In the summer of 1902, Becker wrote to Turner:

I do not know whether you have learned in any way that I am going to Kansas with Abbott next year ... The arrangement is that Abbott and I divide the European History between us ... On the whole it is not a bad position; I am told that \$800 is as good in Kansas as 1000 or 1200 in Hanover.<sup>141</sup>

Becker's appointment at the University of Kansas marked the true beginning of his academic career. He would remain at Kansas until 1916, by which time his reputation as a scholar and a writer was ascendant.<sup>142</sup> It was at Kansas that Becker first made public his historiography, with

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<sup>136</sup> Wilkins, 57

<sup>137</sup> See p. 72-73 a note on pragmatism

<sup>138</sup> Smith, *On History*, 16-17

<sup>139</sup> Turner to Becker, November 17<sup>th</sup> 1899, quoted in Smith, *On Historians*, 17; emphasis presumably Turner's

<sup>140</sup> Haskins to Becker, June 14<sup>th</sup> 1901, quoted in Smith, *On Historians*, 17

<sup>141</sup> Becker to Turner, June 23<sup>rd</sup> 1902, in Kammen, 4-5; I believe this is the earliest surviving letter Becker wrote to Turner.

<sup>142</sup> See Wilkins, 67



the essay “Detachment and the Writing of History,” as well as in a series of lengthy book reviews.

However, by the time Becker arrived at Kansas his historiographic thinking was already in ferment. The challenges of his first years at Kansas were more administrative than philosophical – organizing and leading classes, finishing his doctorate (finally taken at Wisconsin in 1907), preparing the manuscript of his first book for the press.<sup>143</sup> Teaching remained challenging for Becker; he remained shy and inhibited in front of his classes. During his first year at Kansas, Haskins wrote in encouragement: “Take a hint from the remark about not looking at your class! I remember that as a defect at Madison. Look them fiercely in the eye!”<sup>144</sup> Becker never embraced public speaking engagements or lecture halls, but his manner would improve as he gained experience and confidence in his ability.<sup>145</sup>

One more thing to mention before we speed ahead to meet Becker in 1910, indicting the historical orthodoxy. While studying at Columbia, Becker met his wife-to-be, Maude Hepworth Ranney. Ranney was slightly older than Becker, a widow, and daughter of a New York physician.<sup>146</sup> She herself had a daughter, Edith, from her first marriage. Edith was around seven years old when Becker met her mother.<sup>147</sup> Ranney and Becker married in 1901, a surprise to Becker’s family. Becker’s mother took the news graciously:

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<sup>143</sup> For the doctorate see Smith, *On History*, 20, also see letter from Haskins to Becker, October 27<sup>th</sup> 1902, Box 7

<sup>144</sup> Haskins to Becker, January 1903 Box 7

<sup>145</sup> See Wilkins 66-67 for his discussion of Becker’s lack of charisma

<sup>146</sup> Smith, *On History*, 17

<sup>147</sup> Kammen, 90 n. 2, 3; Edith would suffer from some sort of mental illness for most of her life. The source of this illness has been generally attributed to a bout sickness during adolescence and an improper medical treatment that followed. Due to the period’s stigma of mental illness and the Beckers’ cultivation of personal privacy, little information exists about the nature of this illness or about Edith’s relationship with her parents. Becker rarely mentioned his stepdaughter, and no letters to her survive. See Kammen, 90, 93, 95 for Carl’s letters to Maude regarding Edith.

...such a surprise to us all, we will get use to before you come home and you may be sure of a welcome for yourself and wife. I shall love her and be a mother to her because you love her, and after I have seen her and know her I shall love her for herself.<sup>148</sup>

Carl and Maude would have a son, Frederick, on February 17<sup>th</sup>, 1910.<sup>149</sup> They would remain married (happily, by all accounts) until Carl's death in 1945. Maude survived him by 12 years, dying in 1957.<sup>150</sup>

### *The Croce Question*

Before we arrive at 1910, I must pause to weigh in on a scholarly dispute. In 1970, an article by Chester Destler appeared in the journal *History and Theory*. In this article, Destler claimed that Becker had committed “ideological plagiarism,” lifting the entirety of his relativist theory directly from Douglas Ainslie's 1909 translation of Benedetto Croce's *Etetica*.<sup>151</sup>

Destler was reacting to the work of Charlotte Smith, Cushing Strout, and Burleigh Wilkins, all of whom had argued that Becker's idea was original and arrived at organically. Destler was not convinced: “The reiterated thesis that [Becker's relativist theory] was an independent conception developed within pragmatist philosophy is entirely unproven.”<sup>152</sup>

Hayden White wrote a rebuttal (which appeared the next year, also in *History and Theory*) of Destler's position. White, writing two years before the publication of his famous *Metahistory*, distilled Destler's position into three points and proceeded to take them apart piece

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<sup>148</sup> Mom to Becker, June 6<sup>th</sup> 1901 Box 7

<sup>149</sup> Birth Notice, Box 7; it is tempting to view the name “Frederick” as a tribute to Turner. I could not locate any information on the Beckers' naming decision, so this attribution is merely speculative.

<sup>150</sup> Kammen, 90 n. 2

<sup>151</sup> Chester McArthur Destler, “The Crocean Origin of Becker's Historical Relativism,” *History and Theory* 9, no. 3 (1970): 335.

<sup>152</sup> Destler, 335

by piece. White harshly criticizes Destler for “display[ing] both a want of tact in intellectual historical matters and an apparent desire to denigrate Becker’s work.”<sup>153</sup>

As yet another Beckerian holding to the party line – I fully believe that Becker’s relativism was an “independent conception,” original and arrived at organically – it is important that I am able to side confidently with White. I have a significant amount of skin in this game, and I intend to show that Destler’s article resulted from poor scholarship and is not at all supported by the evidence. My goal here is not to rehash White’s refutation of Destler, which is witheringly effective, but to supplement it with an analysis of the source material in question, much of it untreated in White’s piece.

Destler’s argument is built upon a series of subtle leaps of logic and reinforced by an excess of imprecise, overbroad citations. The result, after an uncritical first reading, is convincing, if a little conspiratorial. However, an analysis of the sources reveals his position to be demonstrably false. After his initial assertion that the notion of Becker’s relativism being an independent idea is “entirely unproven,” Destler calls attention to a 1938 article in the *New Republic* in which “Becker stated that Croce had helped him to shape his ideas about history.”<sup>154</sup> This article is titled “Books That Changed Our Minds,” it was published in the December 7, 1938 issue of the *New Republic* (details Destler neglected to include, though very useful for tracking down the article in question). As its title implies, the piece was a compilation of noted American authors revealing what books they had found influential. Becker’s contribution:

I have a letter from The New Republic which asks me to note any books during the last thirty or forty years which have impressed me or influenced my thinking. Undoubtedly many books have influenced my thinking, or at least clarified ideas I already had (which is about the only way books influence thinking anyway). Those I can think of off hand are the following:

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<sup>153</sup> Hayden White, “Croce and Becker: A Note on the Evidence of Influence,” *History and Theory* 10, no. 2 (1971): 225.

<sup>154</sup> Destler, 335

Sumner's "Folkways," which impressed me with the relativity of custom and ideas. Freud's "Introduction to Psychoanalysis," which made explicit the notion that the wish is father to the thought...

Croce's "History and the Writing of History" helped to shape my ideas about history, which I set forth in the address "Everyman His Own Historian."...<sup>155</sup>

That last bit is critical to Destler's argument. He assuredly tells us that:

The address restated briefly the historical relativism that [Becker] had first elaborated in 1910 in 'Detachment and the Writing of History.' Obviously, if Becker was aided by Croce in formulating this theory, it was in preparation of that article and must have been derived from a Crocean treatise or treatises published earlier.<sup>156</sup>

In 1938, Becker wrote that "[Croce] helped to shape my ideas about history, which I set forth in the address 'Everyman...'" Becker presented "Everyman" to the American Historical Association in 1931. The only obvious deduction from these facts is that Becker had read Croce prior to 1931. Yet Destler posits that the "Everyman" address was merely a brief restatement of Becker's 1910 position. This being the case, Destler then deduces that Becker must have read Croce prior to his 1910 essay "Detachment." This interpretation shows only a cursory understanding of Becker's relativism, and allows no room for 21 years of reading, writing, and development to alter Becker's position in any meaningful way. This is simplistic and unsubtle, but necessary for Destler's argument to hold any water at all. For if Becker were already formulating his relativism prior to reading Croce, "ideological plagiarism" would be impossible.

Having thus "established" Becker's exposure to Croce prior to 1910, Destler then examines the young professor's workload and mindset:

Before mid-1909 he was preoccupied with course preparation and with seeing his *History of Political Parties in the State of New York* through the press. He lacked the time for philosophical study such as was necessary for the independent formulation of a theory of historical relativism. His review of Edward Channing, *History of the United States*, II, in

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<sup>155</sup> Carl Becker in "Books That Changed Our Minds," by Malcolm Cowley, *The New Republic* (December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1938): 135.

<sup>156</sup> Destler, 336

1908 confessed that he possessed no such theory then. Yet, between 1910 and 1914 he published three articles upon historical theory and a related review...<sup>157</sup>

Destler does not give us an approximation of just how much “time for philosophical study” would be necessary to independently formulate a theory of historical relativism (any estimate would be vapid), but he would have us believe Becker was busy enough to not have time enough. Yet as I have showed, the roots of Becker’s relativism run deep. By 1910, Becker had been chewing over these ideas for 15 years at least.

Destler’s alternative is attractively simple: Becker, overworked from his students and publishing obligations, got his hands on a copy of Ainslie’s 1909 English translation of Benedetto Croce’s *Estetica*. Profoundly influenced by its contents, he endeavored to make the ideas his own, resulting in the publication of “Detachment” in the next year. In support of his position, Destler refers us to a review Becker wrote in 1908, on the second volume of Channing’s *History of the United States*. Destler neglected to point us to a specific portion of the review; his footnote cites it wholesale.<sup>158</sup> If Destler is correct, this 1908 review (published a year prior to the English translation of the *Estetica*) should have no hints of Becker’s 1910 relativist statement, indeed it should “confes[s] that he possessed no such theory then.” Happily, this is not the case.

Becker began his 1908 review regularly enough, walking through each portion of Channing’s volume, offering criticisms and compliments. But near the end of the review, things began to get interesting:

Professor Channing has the air of saying: “This is what happened in this place, and at this time, to these people; interpret as you please.”

But if Professor Channing will not bore us with any philosophy of history, it is a pleasure to record that he by no means measures up to Renan’s wonderful standard; his

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<sup>157</sup> Destler, 337

<sup>158</sup> Destler, 336 n. 10

history is not composed “with as much supreme indifference as if it were written on another planet.” No! Professor Channing has his likes and dislikes.<sup>159</sup>

Here, we see Becker in 1908 already reacting against objectivist tendencies in historical writing. The passage of Renan quoted here would become a favorite target of Becker’s, a standard-bearer of the scientism he was working against.<sup>160</sup> Becker would quote the same passage of Renan in 1910 and 1913.<sup>161</sup> This bit of criticism, at least, could not have been taken from Croce. His review continues:

The century from 1660 to 1760, we are told (p. 3), was for England “a positive retrogression.” Here we seem to feel a little of the breath of the *zeitgeist*. Retrogression from what, we ask. What was the goal? The Reform Bill, perhaps? Or universal suffrage? Or Socialism? There is a difficulty there.<sup>162</sup>

The difficulty Becker sensed was not Channing’s. Rather, it was not exclusive to Channing. It was a broader problem, a difficulty inherent in the practice of history. In this passage, Becker touched on both the social (“breath of the *zeitgeist*”) and normative (“retrogression from what?”) aspects of historical writing. These themes would become dominant in his later work, and they were present already in 1908. Becker ended his review with the following sentiment:

It is difficult to write history without having any theory about it. We believe Professor Channing has some very good theories about it, and only regret that he has concealed the best part of them.<sup>163</sup>

Though not a robust relativist statement, Becker’s 1908 review touched on themes he would develop two years later in “Detachment.” A professional review of a historical survey is indeed a curious place to bring up historical theory, especially in the relatively untroubled pre-war *zeitgeist* of 1908. We should consider its appearance here as evidence of the depth of Becker’s

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<sup>159</sup> Carl Becker, review of *A History of the United States Vol. II* by Edward Channing, *The Nation* 87, no. 2262 (1908): 440; at this time, the reviewers of *The Nation* did not sign their pieces. However, all circumstances point to Becker’s authorship. The review is written in Becker’s style, and he would later write (signed) reviews for Volumes III and IV of Channing’s sprawling history. There is no dissent in the secondary scholarship on this matter.

<sup>160</sup> The passage is from Renan’s work, *The Apostles*, on p. 44 1866

<sup>161</sup> “Detachment” p., “Social aspects” p. 661, respectively

<sup>162</sup> Becker, review of Channing’s *A History of the United States Vol. II* (1908)

<sup>163</sup> *ibid.*

thoughts on the matter. Becker had thought about historical theory so much that he could not *not* think about it. It was beginning to crop up everywhere.

By this point, the fragility of Destler's argument should be clear. In 1938, Becker indicated that Croce had influenced his thinking prior to writing "Everyman His Own Historian," but made no mention of when he had read Croce.<sup>164</sup> Destler made the leap of dating Becker's exposure to before 1910, thus opening the possibility of plagiarism. However, Becker's 1908 writings make it abundantly clear that he was well on his way to his 1910 position prior to the publication of Croce's *Estetica* in English in 1909. To drive the final nail into the coffin, I will enlist Charles Haskins, writing to Becker soon after reading "Detachment":

I have read with great interest and pleasure your article in the October Atlantic. It does you credit both in thought in style, and I am proud to recognize in one or two places traces of lines of discussions which you began in your student days at Madison.<sup>165</sup>

All of this is a long way of saying that Destler's argument is both mean-spirited and fundamentally wrong. Simply put, I see no reason to doubt Becker in this instance, as he made a regular habit of generously acknowledging his intellectual debts. I take comfort too in White's treatment of Destler, who quietly abdicated in an editorial note appended to White's piece and

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<sup>164</sup> Becker first read Croce in 1922. In a draft of his Croce review, Becker gave a brief account of his introduction to the philosopher:

Noting an interesting title – "The Theory and Practice of History" – among the list of recent publications, I asked the New Republic to send the book to me for review. The name of the author was not wholly unfamiliar. I had seen Benedetto Croce casually mentioned in connections which led me to wonder whether the man might be a minor poet of the Renaissance, or better still perhaps, some newly celebrated patriot of the Risorgimento. From the title of the book it seemed that he must be a historian. When the book came I learned, with some dismay, that he was none of these, but a modern philosopher of reputation and significance. Knowing this, I knew that a review of his book on history must necessarily begin: "It is well known that the philosophy of Benedetto Croce", etc. Unfortunately, I did not know what it was that was well known about the philosophy of Benedetto Croce. It was therefore necessary, not only to read the new book carefully ... but also to go to the library and do some weeks of hard reading in certain other works of the author, such as the *Aesthetic* ...

See Box XX for this introduction to his 1922 review of Croce's *Theory and Practice* (paired with Robinson's *New History*). Also see White, 224-225.

<sup>165</sup> Haskins to Becker, October 18<sup>th</sup> 1910, Box 1 (?)

made no more noise regarding Becker's Crocean theft. With all this said, I believe we can lay the matter to rest and turn our attention to the subject of the controversy itself, Becker's 1910 essay "Detachment and the Writing and History."



## **Part Two – The Development of Becker’s Historiography**

With the largest early influences on Becker’s thinking – his religious doubts, literary aspirations, and the mentorship of Turner and Haskins –now identified, we turn to Becker’s historiography itself. Becker’s historical theories have been the subject of considerable scholarship, much more so than his life or early writings, so I will take a moment to describe the apposite works and orient myself amongst them.

Three books have been written about Becker. The earliest, *Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion*, by Charlotte Watkins Smith, focuses mainly on Becker’s relativism and writing style. Smith conducted a thorough study of the Carl Becker papers at Cornell. Her book is valuable because of the longform transcriptions of letters and reviews it includes. However, the long blocks of quoted material often make it feel like you are reading Becker abridged, not Smith herself. Her book is more of a Beckerian primer than a Beckerian commentary.

Next to be published was Cushing Strout’s *The Pragmatic Revolt in American History: Carl Becker and Charles Beard*. As implied by the title, Strout focuses both on Beard and Becker, alternating chapters between the two. Strout’s study is organized topically, focusing on each man’s reactions against the professional orthodoxy and the problems they encounter along the way. It is cogent and well-written.

Finally, there is *Carl Becker*, by Burleigh Taylor Wilkins. Designating his book an “intellectual biography,” Wilkins traces Becker’s intellectual and personal development from childhood onward. In this regard, his approach is close to mine. His scope, however, is broader, attempting to comprehensively cover Becker’s life and work. Due to this aim, the origins he proposes for Becker’s thought are a little breezy (i.e. Becker had religious doubts as a kid and

was then exposed to many powerful thinkers, ergo he became committed relativist).<sup>166</sup> In addition, Wilkins occasionally indulges in interesting tangents which may or may not be pertinent to the point at hand.<sup>167</sup> I do not mean to be flip with all this; I am merely trying to make some room for myself, to convince you to continue reading my writing and not scurry off to somewhere else. Wilkins' study is very good; the best one-stop introduction to Becker's thought to be had. My purpose is more focused – to show why Becker began to conceive of history as he did (Part One), and to then map out his conception over time, noting where it changes and why I think it did so (Part Two).

In addition to these three works, there is a published collection of Becker letters (*“What Is the Good of History?”*), edited by Michael Kammen; a collection of essays published posthumously (*Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl L. Becker*), edited by Phil Snyder; and a significant number of articles on a variety of Beckerian topics. Carl Becker is also a reoccurring character in Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*, but he is never treated thoroughly therein. I will draw from these sources as appropriate.

My method in this second part will be less narrative than in the first, but equally chronological. The greatest failing of Strout's study is that he conceived of Becker as monolithic, a man who thought in one way over time.<sup>168</sup> This is an excellent tool for making a thinker easy to comprehend, but it has its costs. Much of the nuance is lost when decades of thought are grouped under a single banner. In addition, many questions become impossible to answer: how can we discuss the impact of the First World War on Becker's thinking if all we know is that he was a relativistic historian who thought in a certain way and lived from 1873 to 1945? Accordingly, I

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<sup>166</sup> See Wilkins 190, where he acknowledges that “a far more difficult question to answer is why Becker had ever become such a thoroughgoing relativist in the first place.”

<sup>167</sup> See p. 31, also p. 45

<sup>168</sup> For examples of this, see Strout, *The Pragmatic Revolt*, 36, where he cites works from 1916, 1921, 1925, and 1931; 32 (1915, 1919, 1936, 1942); 69 (1914, 1920, 1943); the mixing of periods in the citations occurs throughout

will walk with Becker through his career, considering each major statement of his thought and contrasting it to those that came before.

Fortunately, Becker was reasonably stable in his position, so our journey will not be as long as it might have been. Historiographic thought crept into much of Becker's writing, and he published nearly twenty pieces explicitly on historiography. Three of these are particularly important: the 1910 essay "Detachment and the Writing of History", the 1926 essay "What are Historical Facts?", and the 1931 address "Everyman His Own Historian." These three works will serve as pylons along our path; reviews and letters will fill in the spaces between as best they can.

Because many of Becker's central ideas first appeared between 1908 and 1914, our approach will be frontloaded. I will first describe the key ideas present in his early work, as well as his audience and mindset at the time. Then, with these ideas in mind, we will move on to his later statements and examine the differences that appear, as well as the changes occurring in the world around them. Let's begin.

### *Detachment and the Writing of History*

1910 was an outstanding year for Carl Becker – his son, Frederick De Witt Becker, was born on February 17<sup>th</sup>, his excellent essay "Kansas" was published in December, and the seminal statement of his historiography appeared in the October volume of the *Atlantic Monthly*.

"Detachment and the Writing of History" was an indictment of scientific history, aimed at Becker's scientific colleagues within the historical profession.

Much of Becker's historiography was a response to the orthodoxy of his time, not an attempt to generate a freestanding historical theory. Because Becker's theory was mainly phrased as a critique, it is necessary to briefly explore the subject of his criticism. Scientific history, imported from Europe, came into vogue in America alongside the rise of the historical profession in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Scientific history emphasized the necessity of an unbiased, objective approach to historical investigation, following the example of the natural sciences. Leopold von Ranke, widely regarded as the founding father of professional, source-based history, was held up as the ideal historical researcher – empirical, unbiased, attempting only to determine the past “as it really was.”<sup>169</sup> To study history was to pursue a comprehensive understanding of the past, every fact in its proper place. The goal of the individual historian was to make a “permanent contribution to knowledge,” even if but a small one. Each small, solid block of history contributed to the larger structure.<sup>170</sup> Historian Edward Cheyney extended the architectural metaphor in a 1907 talk:

The scientific writer of history builds no Gothic cathedral, full of irregularities and suggestiveness ... he builds a classic temple: simple, severe, symmetrical in its lines, surrounded by the clear, bright light of truth ... Every historical fact is a stone hewn from the quarry of past records; it must be solid and square and even-hued ... His design already exists, the events have actually occurred, the past really has been – his task is to approach as near to the design as he possibly can.<sup>171</sup>

A beautiful vision, to be sure. But one with its problems. Scientific history was notoriously unphilosophical, perhaps even anti-philosophical. When the scientific historian heard “philosophy of history”, he thought of some grand speculative scheme instead of an analytical

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<sup>169</sup> One of Scientific History's slogans, frequently lampooned by Becker, was a Ranke quote: *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (as it really was). See Novick, 28 for a discussion of the ambiguity in translating and interpreting the phrase. He notes that *eigentlich* can be translated as “really” or “essentially”, and Ranke most often used it in the “essentially” sense. This, of course, has implications for Ranke's conception of history. It is immaterial here, however, because the American scientificists took it in the “really” sense, and professed a commitment to absolute objectivity. This was the claim Becker was reacting against.

<sup>170</sup> Novick gives a good analysis of the project of scientific history in the first chapter of his book. See Novick, 21-46

<sup>171</sup> Cheyney “What Is History?” in Novick, 56

examination of epistemology.<sup>172</sup> This sort of analysis was not thought to be a prerequisite to sound historical study; indeed, it was considered detrimental to a young student's development. Philosophy was separate from history, and rightfully so. The facts were there, waiting to be uncovered. All you had to do was start digging.

By 1910, the consensus built up around historical scientism was showing signs of wear. At Columbia, Robinson had been developing and promoting his "New History" for years. Turner, President of the American Historical Association that year, titled his presidential address "Social Forces in American History," a clear departure from the strict political history most often associated with scientism. In his address, Turner easily referred to:

A familiar doctrine that each age studies its history anew and with interests determined by the spirit of the time. Each age finds it necessary to reconsider at least some portions of the past, from points of view furnished by new conditions which reveal the influence and significance of forces not adequately known by the historians of the previous generation.<sup>173</sup>

Yet these perspectives were not repudiations of the core of scientific history, but modifications around its edges. Robinson and Turner did not attack the ideal of objectivity itself, though they did not always carefully consider the full implications of their statements. Turner asserted that "each age" reconsiders "portions of the past," yet he did not say if one reconsideration could be more accurate, more truthful, or more useful than another. Turner's position was ambiguous enough to remain comfortable for the profession. Becker's would not be.

Becker opened "Detachment" with a volley of intellectual name-dropping. In the first two pages, he referenced Dumas, Lamartine, Thomas Buckle, Herbert Spencer, Minot, Bagehot, Gibbon, as well as "the first volume of the *Cambridge Modern History*."<sup>174</sup> Perhaps Becker, still

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<sup>172</sup> Novick, 30

<sup>173</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner American Historical Association 1910 Presidential Address

<sup>174</sup> Becker, *Detachment*, 3-4; Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870), French author of *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers*; Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869), French poet involved in the establishment of the Second

a young professor at an obscure university, was attempting to establish his academic credentials before blasting the establishment. Regardless, after his opening salvo, Becker abandoned his pretensions and stated the position of scientific history as he saw it:

No, the modern historian is not given to generalization. It is not his business to generalize, – so, at least, he thinks; it is his business to find out and to record “exactly what happened.” ... History is what happened; the historian must write it down, if not like Gibbon, at least *wie es ist eigentlich gewesen*.<sup>175</sup>

The goal of the modern historian’s project was to make “a permanent contribution to knowledge.”<sup>176</sup> Yet this goal was immediately problematic:

The thoughtful man knows well, in spite of what the reviewers say every month, that it is not easy to make a permanent contribution to knowledge. In every age, able men have written histories; of them all, a few have proved permanent contributions to literature; as history, not one but must be edited. Even the great masters ... do not escape.<sup>177</sup>

What, then, was the aspiring historian to do? No sense in attempting another grand synthesis that will assuredly be overthrown within his lifetime:

Little wonder if the modern historian, stumbling over the wreckage that strews his path, has no desire to add anything of his own to the debris. Much better, he thinks, to be employed quarrying out of the bedrock of historical fact even one stone, so it be chiseled four-square, that may find its niche in the permanent structure of some future master-builder.<sup>178</sup>

This was the vision of scientific history: a multitude of dedicated scholars, dutifully chiseling out blocks of fact to be later assembled by the rare historical master. A beautiful vision, one that could accommodate the studious mediocrity of the average scholar, the prodigious talent of the

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Republic; Henry Thomas Buckle (1821-1862), English historian who wrote an unfinished *History of Civilization*; Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), English polymath who proposed a Darwinian theory of societal evolution; Charles Sedgwick Minot (1852-1914), American scientist; Walter Bagehot (1826-1877), English journalist; Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), English historian, famous for his six-volume *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; Cambridge *Modern History*, first volume (on the Renaissance) published in 1902.

<sup>175</sup> Becker, *Detachment*, 5-6; see n. 169 above for a discussion of *wie es ist eigentlich gewesen*.

<sup>176</sup> *ibid.*, 6

<sup>177</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>178</sup> *ibid.*, 7

master historian, and the unifying goal of an ultimate, comprehensive historical record. But could such a vision stand up under criticism?

Becker did not think so. He began his critique with a closer looker at the scientific historians' concept of fact:

A fact is something substantial, something material, something you can perhaps take up in your hand, or stand upon: it will always bear your weight. And so, with much talk about "cold facts," and "hard facts," and not being able to "get around the facts," it has come to pass where the historical fact seems almost material too, something that can be handed about and pressed with the thumb to test its solidity.<sup>179</sup>

But no, Becker thought, that could not be right. Perhaps for the verifiable facts of natural science, but not for the "historical fact," which was a different beast:

But, in truth, the historical fact is a thing wonderfully elusive after all, very difficult to fix, almost impossible to distinguish from "theory," to which it is commonly supposed to be so completely antithetical.<sup>180</sup>

With this mild statement, Becker opened the door to a world of trouble. Historical facts were the common currency of the profession, the remnants of the past upon which theories could be built. By insinuating that historical fact was just the same as historical theory, Becker was clearing the way for all sorts of complications.

Becker understood that his conflation of historical fact and theory would be scoffed at, dismissed outright. So he endeavored to make it more definite with an example. He considered the simple fact that "Caesar was stabbed by the senators, in the senate-house at Rome."<sup>181</sup> But this fact was "simple only in the sense that it is a simple statement easily comprehended."<sup>182</sup> It is both a composite of many smaller facts ("the senators standing round, the words that were said, the scuffle, the three and twenty dagger-strokes...") and a building block for larger facts ("that

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<sup>179</sup> *ibid.*, 10

<sup>180</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *ibid.*

Anthony, Octavius, and Lepidus replaced Caesar in the government in Rome.”)<sup>183</sup> Becker posited that this property – of being simultaneously a composite of smaller facts and a structural element of larger facts – held for every historical fact in existence:

Thus, while we speak of historical facts as if they were pebbles to be gathered in a cup, there is in truth no unit fact in history. The historical reality is continuous, and infinitely complex; and the cold hard facts into which it is said to be analyzed are not concrete portions of the reality, but only aspects of it. The reality of history has forever disappeared, and the “facts” of history, whatever they once were, are only mental images or pictures which the historian makes in order to comprehend it.<sup>184</sup>

There was no “unit fact in history.” This is a succinct phrasing of one of Becker’s main ideas, one that he would return to in the 20s and 30s. Historical facts were images of the past, created by the historian in the present.

Becker’s next question easily followed: “How, then, are these images formed?”<sup>185</sup> Here is where the actual past, the reality of the past, could assist us: “Not from the reality directly, for the reality has ceased to exist. But the reality has left certain traces, and these help us to construct the image.”<sup>186</sup> A witness to Caesar’s stabbing would write down a statement recording what he saw, and later historians would read it. Becker, as a later historian reading the statement, walked us through his thinking process:

As I read, a mental picture is at once formed: several men in a room, at the base of a statue, driving daggers into one of their number. But it is not the statement alone that enables me to form the picture: my own experience enters in. I have seen men and rooms and daggers, and my experience of these things furnishes the elements of which the picture is composed. Suppose me to know nothing of the ancient Roman world: my picture would doubtless be composed of the senate-chamber at Washington, of men in frock coats, and of bowie-knives, perhaps. It is true, the picture changes as I read more of

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<sup>183</sup> *ibid.*, 10-11

<sup>184</sup> *ibid.*, 11

<sup>185</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> *ibid.*; A central point of Becker’s was to distinguish between two sorts of pasts, the past which occurred, and the past which we remember. To make this separation clear, I use the “actual past,” the “reality of the past,” or “past reality” to refer to the former, and the “historical past” to refer to the latter. In the same vein, I use the word “history” to refer to the present-tense reconstruction of the past, not the actual past itself. Some later critics of Becker thought that he was mistaken in his conception of two pasts; see Zagorin’s “Professor Becker’s Two Histories: A Skeptical Fallacy”



the Roman world. Yet at each step in this transformation, it is still my own experience that furnishes the new elements for the new picture. New sources enable me to combine the elements of experience more correctly, but experience must furnish the elements to select from.<sup>187</sup>

This was Becker's first move against scientism: the scientific conception of "fact" was not the same as the historical conception of "fact." Historical facts were instead images that the historian generated from the available evidence and his own experience.

Personal experience performed double-duty in Becker's historiography. Not only was experience the store from which historians drew from when crafting their historical facts, it was also the "final court of appeal in evaluating the sources themselves. History rests on testimony, but the qualitative value of testimony is determined in the last analysis by tested and accepted experience."<sup>188</sup> Our history must correspond to our present, everyday experience. When we encounter testimony that conflicts with our experience-verified conception of reality, we consider the testimony unreliable, even if we can easily create an image (i.e. historical fact) of the event in question.<sup>189</sup> This is similar to the Humean argument against miracles, which Becker referenced.<sup>190</sup> Because miracles are by definition contrary to natural law, which is known by everyday experience and can be verified by empirical research, testimony affirming miraculous occurrences must be considered unreliable. Miracle-affirming testimony can only be considered valid if either: (1) more witnesses observed the miracle than observed the natural law it contradicted; or (2) the miracle-affirming witness was entirely reliable. Because natural law is continually observed by everyone, and no witness can be proved to be 100% reliable, miracle-

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<sup>187</sup> *ibid.*, 11-12

<sup>188</sup> *ibid.*, 12

<sup>189</sup> Becker gave the following example: we can easily picture Archimedes destroying the Roman fleet with a burning mirror (as asserted by Lucian and Galen), but we consider this story to be mythological rather than actual.

<sup>190</sup> Becker, *Detachment*, 13

affirming testimony can always be discounted.<sup>191</sup> As Becker said, the “argument does not really prove that miracles never occurred in history; it proves only that there is no use in having a past through which the intellect cannot freely range with a certain sense of security. If we cannot be on familiar terms with our past, it is no good.”<sup>192</sup>

Having fixed the historical fact firmly in present experience, Becker moved to the next piece of his argument. The study of history had traditionally been divided into two phases: analysis, where the relevant sources were collected, read, parsed, and sorted; and synthesis, in which the relevant bits from the parsed sources are ordered and assembled into a narrative. The scientific historians had affirmed this division. Becker rejected it:

The distinction is doubtless a convenient one, but it will not bear too close inspection. If there is no unit fact in history, if the fact are only mental images, why then, it must be very difficult to assert a fact without thereby making a synthesis. “Caesar was stabbed in the senate-house” is a fact, but it is also a synthesis of other facts. Strictly speaking, analysis and synthesis cannot be rigidly distinguished.<sup>193</sup>

Indeed, if a perfect analysis of the sources could be achieved, no synthesis would be necessary: “What, after all, remains to be done by our objective man ... intent to record exactly what happened[?] Everything that happened, so far as any trace of it is left, is already recorded, it seems.”<sup>194</sup> But Becker proposed that the historian did not intend to simply note exactly what had happened. Instead, historians were interested in making something purposeful:

... not to record exactly what happened, but by simplification to convey an intelligible meaning of what happened. With that problem every constructive historian is engaged from the first step to the last.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> See the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on “Miracles”; natural law here refers only to empirically-established, scientific laws, not the normative natural law theory of ethics.

<sup>192</sup> Becker, *Detachment*, 13

<sup>193</sup> *ibid.*, 15

<sup>194</sup> *ibid.*, 16

<sup>195</sup> *ibid.*, 16

This is the first appearance of “meaning” in the essay. Meaning was a key concept for Becker. It often resided below the surface of his writing, only implied or suggested. Becker knew how slippery the word was, how difficult it was to box, to pin down. He never endeavored to define it explicitly, just as he was reluctant to define “history.” Yet the concept informed his entire historiography. Historians wrote history to create something meaningful, not to find out precisely what had happened. Meaning was what made history worthwhile, and it was through synthesis that history was imbued with meaning.<sup>196</sup>

Fundamentally, synthesis was selection. And selection was problematic: “which of the numberless particular facts shall the historian select?”<sup>197</sup> Some criterion for making selections was needed, “some objective standard for determining the relative value of facts; a standard which, being applied by any number of trained historians, will give the same result in each case.”<sup>198</sup> What could this standard be? The scientificists, drawing from Heinrich Rickert, had an answer: “the historian selects facts that are unique, facts that have value on account of their uniqueness, facts that are causally connected, facts that reveal unique change or evolution.”<sup>199</sup> Becker pointed out that the word *value* was “disquieting,” and Rickert agreed:

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<sup>196</sup> Becker separated “real” synthesis and “real” analysis from source-analysis and source-synthesis (see Becker, *Detachment*, 16):

There is no real analysis and no real synthesis. When the historian is engaged in what the methodologists call analysis, it is not the reality that he takes apart, but only the sources, – a very different matter.

The division is not entirely clear. Perhaps by “real” analysis/synthesis he meant analysis/synthesis that acted directly on the actual past, which was impossible in his conception.

Becker proceeded to use the unqualified term “synthesis” in the remainder of the essay, which I take to mean source-synthesis (i.e. synthesis dealing with the available sources). Therefore, read “synthesis” here as “source-synthesis” if it clarifies things for you. Becker’s confusing categorization is not terribly important for comprehending the central points of “Detachment,” and in later formulations of his historiography, Becker would approach the synthesis-analysis issue with different terminology.

<sup>197</sup> Becker, *Detachment*, 18

<sup>198</sup> *ibid.*, 18

<sup>199</sup> *ibid.*, 18; Becker was paraphrasing again an English paraphrase of Rickert’s ideas (originally in German), so the attribution to Rickert is not quite pure.

The use of the word value ... seems to introduce an uncertain and arbitrary element into the problem. But the question of value is not a question of partisanship, nor of approval or disapproval; it is a question of importance. The Protestant may love Luther, the Catholic may hate him, but they would agree that Luther is important for the Reformation.<sup>200</sup>

Becker was not impressed: "To say that the question of value is a question of importance, does little to resolve the difficulty."<sup>201</sup> For how did the historian come to consider the Reformation important in the first place? And what aspect of the Reformation must be emphasized? An economic interpretation of the Reformation, would propose the movement to be "primarily an illustration, on a grand scale, of the law of diminishing returns. That concept, if it is intelligible at all, is intelligible without Luther."<sup>202</sup> And considering the Reformation to be an occurrence worth studying was a value judgment of the same kind that determined Luther to be the pivotal piece of it. "After all, do the facts come first and determine the concept, or does the concept come first and determine the facts? The heart of the question is there."<sup>203</sup>

In Becker's view, the scientificists did not have a satisfactory response to the selection problem. Becker proposed a resolution:

Consider the trained historian, intent on studying the sixteenth century. Before him are the analyzed sources – the "facts" – ... As he goes over and over his cards, some aspects of the reality recorded there interest him more, others less; some are retained, others forgotten ... And the reason is simple: some facts strike the mind as interesting or suggestive, have a meaning of some sort, lead to some desirable end, because they associate themselves with ideas already in the mind; they fit in somehow to the ordered experience of the historian.<sup>204</sup>

Here is meaning for the second time. Becker did not delve into what made some facts interesting and others boring; I suspect that he would consider it entirely contextual (i.e. determined by the historian in question and his surroundings). But it was *meaning* that the historian was after, some

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<sup>200</sup> Becker quoting a paraphrase of Rickert (see n. 199 above); *ibid.*, 19

<sup>201</sup> *ibid.*, 19

<sup>202</sup> *ibid.*, 20

<sup>203</sup> *ibid.*, 20

<sup>204</sup> *ibid.*, 24-25

desirable quality that could make the story appeal to author and audience. This pursuit of meaning was not necessarily conscious, instead “only half deliberate. It is accomplished almost automatically. The mind *will* select and discriminate from the very beginning.”<sup>205</sup> The objective, detached, scientific historian was not immune from this pursuit – instead of selecting for some explicit bias, he attempted to remain completely neutral, validating his objectivity: “His synthesis must vindicate, not Luther or Leo X, but his own ideal of detachment.”<sup>206</sup> Selection was the essence of synthesis, and a historian’s selections were influenced by his interests and goals. The scientific had the goal of proving that truly objective writing was possible, and they made their selections with this aim in mind. If they conceded this influence on their thinking, they would admit to being unobjective; further, they would be forced to acknowledge that true objectivity was impossible. This was Becker’s intention.

In “Detachment,” Becker presented two principle arguments, each laden with secondary points: (1) historical facts are images that historians create when reflecting about the past; (1[a]) these images are generated from a combination of source documents and present-day experiences; (1[b]) present-day experience provides both raw material for the construction of historical facts and evaluates the validity of source materials (sources are reliable if and only if they align with present-day experience); (2) the process of writing history (i.e. historical synthesis) is fundamentally a process of source-selection; (2[a]) the traditional distinction between synthesis and analysis in the historical process is not well-defined (synthesis and analysis act simultaneously source documents); (2[b]) historians select sources that they find interesting or useful, and attempt to create a synthesis that is *meaningful*; (2[c]) scientific

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<sup>205</sup> *ibid.*, 25; Becker’s emphasis

<sup>206</sup> *ibid.*, 26

historians select in this same way, the ideal of objectivity becomes a vessel for meaning (an ideal they consider to be useful and worth pursuing).

“Detachment and the Writing of History” did not make a big splash, though it was commended where it was noticed. Upon receiving the manuscript, the editors of the *Atlantic* monthly praised its “brilliant common-sense.” They felt “very hospitable towards the article.”<sup>207</sup>

Haskins gave more substantial feedback:

With mo[s]t of the article I find myself in agreement and should be disposed to criticise matters of omission rather than commission. You are quite right that there is no such thing as absolute detachment, but that is no reason why, in most kinds of work, the greatest possible amount of detachment should not be striven for. In the last analysis it is also true that the synthetic and analytic operations cannot be distinguished; practically, however, there is a real distinction, and it is particularly on the analytic side that the element of detachment is most possible. Synthesis is inevitably more subjective.<sup>208</sup>

The necessity of the ideal of objectivity was rooted more firmly in Haskins than in Becker. And though he agreed with Becker on the main points, one senses that Haskins was not willing to follow Becker much further down this road, and perhaps did not even consider the path to be productive in the first place. Still, Haskins was happy to see his former pupil attempting to push forward original thinking, and ended his letter on a congratulatory note:

I realize, however, that your immediate business was rather to puncture certain prevalent misconceptions than to discuss how much practical truth might be left in them, and I congratulate you on the skill with which you have done it.<sup>209</sup>

As Peter Novick tells us, “Becker’s radically skeptical writing appear to have had no discernable impact on historians before the war. (They generally appeared in nonprofessional journals.)”<sup>210</sup> Why did “Detachment,” this first strong statement of Becker’s relativist critique,

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<sup>207</sup> The editors to Becker, November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1909 Box 7

<sup>208</sup> Haskins to Becker, October 18<sup>th</sup> 1910 Box 7; Smith calls Haskins’ evaluation of “Detachment” “just,” but she does not elaborate (Smith, *On History*, 59). It is difficult to pin down her sympathies regarding objectivity and relativism. Wilkins is more explicit, stating in his foreword that “I do not share Becker’s relativism” (Wilkins, vii).

<sup>209</sup> Haskins to Becker, October 18<sup>th</sup> 1910 Box 7; see p. 55 for Haskins’ quote in the same letter on “traces of thoughts from back at Madison.”

<sup>210</sup> Novick, 106

have such a minimal impact on the orthodoxy he was critiquing? Perhaps it was simply a matter of position – the 37-year-old Becker at Kansas was not exactly a lion of the academy. And the *Atlantic Monthly* was an odd place to be publishing a treatise on historiography. But an explanation I am more amiable to is this: at the time, the academic world was not in the mood to heed Becker’s biting remarks about the foundational precepts of its grand project. In 1910, things were looking up. The historical profession had finally begun to make some real progress towards its sweeping structure of knowledge. The world-at-large was reasonably quiet, and the notion of social, technological, and intellectual progress was easy to swallow. Not everyone was as naturally skeptical as Becker, and there was no room for the noise he was making about a frivolous philosophy of history. His other major publication of the year, “Kansas,” received a much warmer welcome. With its cheery outlook and rosy tone, “Kansas” was an essay more in line with the times. Novick makes the same point: “The grace and optimism of ‘Kansas,’ unlike the corrosive skepticism of ‘Detachment,’ was a message to which the historical profession in 1910 could respond.”<sup>211</sup> Becker would have to wait for World War I, the disastrous peace agreement of Versailles, and the subsequent rise of totalitarianism to shake his colleagues into listening. “Becker,” Novick notes, “did not need the catalyst of war, or a concomitant abandonment of social optimism, to turn him into a thoroughgoing relativist.”<sup>212</sup> Yet Novick does not attempt to tell us what *was* necessary for the turn to occur.

As identified in Part One, the driving influences on Becker’s thinking were his religious doubts, his literary aspirations, and the mentorship of Turner and Haskins. Underneath all of this was the fact that Becker was naturally skeptical. Analysis and criticism came more easily to him than belief. These factors can all be identified in “Detachment.” One of Becker’s difficulties with

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<sup>211</sup> Novick, 107

<sup>212</sup> Novick, 107

religion was its fundamental reliance on testimony; the same difficulty was inherent in writing history. Becker's conception of history resolved the issue.<sup>213</sup> He advocated for a history that could be relied on, a history the present could be comfortable with. There was no room in such a history for accounts of supernatural occurrences; such accounts were labeled "unreliable" and gawked at as curiosities. Becker's agnosticism predisposed him to view history as a present-tense construct. It did not matter so much whether or not the miracles of the Bible actually occurred; what mattered was that such occurrences were completely foreign to the present, and thus not useful as history.

Becker's literary leaning appeared in his notion of the purpose of history. It was more important that history be meaningful rather than accurate. Accuracy was a necessary constraint on historical writing, but many equally accurate accounts could be written. Which accurate account should be written? Which pieces of source material should be pursued? The scientific historian answered: "the comprehensive account, all of the extant material!" Becker replied: "the account that matters, the sources that mean something!" A historical narrative must be able to reconcile itself with the extant sources, but beyond that its meaning was utmost. This is very similar to the goal of the artist who just wants "to make something that *matters*." Without meaning, without purpose, even the most comprehensive history would be worthless. This vision grew out of Becker's literary bent.

Turner's influence on "Detachment" is unmistakable. Turner encouraged all of his students to think deeply about the process of writing history, and Becker truly took this to heart. Becker fondly recalled Turner's maxims about history: "history is the self-consciousness of humanity" and "The question is not whether you have a Philosophy of History, but whether the

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<sup>213</sup> See p. 20-21



philosophy you have is good for anything.”<sup>214</sup> Becker subjected these sentiments to a much deeper examination than his mentor ever did, but the impetus came from Turner.<sup>215</sup> Turner’s example was more valuable to Becker than any particular guidance he gave. Turner was Becker’s model of what a scholar could be, not a dry academic jockeying for position, but a curious seeker, sincerely trying to understand something important and true. Turner’s example emboldened Becker as he moved against the establishment, not out of contrarian spite, but in pursuit of the truth of things as he saw it.

A quick note here before we move onward: Becker is frequently classified as a pragmatic thinker.<sup>216</sup> If there was any influence by the pragmatic thinkers on Becker’s relativism, it was minimal and indirect. Becker did mention the pragmatists in “Detachment”:

It is true, the Pragmatists are asking whether, if everything is subject to the law of change, truth be not subject to the law of change, and reality as well – the very facts themselves.<sup>217</sup>

But this was the only mention they received, and Becker never referred to them in his later historiographic essays. This passage should be read as an observation of his alignment with pragmatic thought rather than an acknowledgement of his debt to the pragmatists. When reflecting back on his work in 1938, Becker revisited his relationship to pragmatism:

John Dewey’s books I find hard to understand, but his ideas, coming to me through other writers, have confirmed a native tendency to pragmatic theory. Warner Fite’s “Moral Philosophy” is, I think, the only book on that subject that ever made any impression on me, but that hit the right spot somehow.<sup>218</sup>

I am in the habit of taking Becker at his word when there is no evidence to the contrary, and I will continue to do so here. Becker did read the works of pragmatic philosophers, and he noted

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<sup>214</sup> Becker, *Everyman*, 207

<sup>215</sup> See end of Turner section (p. 40) for a discussion of Turner’s position regarding objectivity.

<sup>216</sup> Strout titled his book on Becker and Beard *The Pragmatic Revolt*; Wilkins 94-95 “the pragmatist Becker”; Smith, *On History*, 121; Novick gives a succinct argument against the influence of pragmatism on the historical profession on 150-151.

<sup>217</sup> Becker, *Detachment*, 7

<sup>218</sup> Becker in “Books That Changed Our Minds,” by Malcolm Cowley

the alignment between their thoughts and his own. However, this is no reason to construe Becker as a disciple of the pragmatic tradition. Classing Becker as a pragmatist is useful when organizing the different lines of American thought. When attempting to trace the influences contributing to his historiography, the classification only confuses things.

### *The Great War and the Terrible Peace*

In the years preceding World War I, Becker continued to expand and refine his historical theories. In 1912, he reviewed Robinson's *The New History*. The review opened:

Every now and then the omniscient reviewer pronounces some historical work to be "definitive." I confess to an entire lack of interest in all such works, – if they really are definitive. Why study a subject about which nothing more can be learned? ... Who cares to open a book that is without defect or amiable weakness? The impeccable thing paralyzes the will and makes pendants of us all. Fortunately, the definitive book in history is never definitive for more than a short while.<sup>219</sup>

He continued his review with a paraphrased critique "of the nineteenth century, with its detachment and scientific method."<sup>220</sup> The idea that history had finally established some solid foundations was itself an old one. Quoting the Book of Job, Becker noted that "every generation is disposed to think 'we are the people and wisdom will die with us.'"<sup>221</sup> Despite this, Becker did not conceive of history as a futile enterprise. In his Robinson review, Becker expressed his view with greater optimism and foresight than he had in "Detachment:"

The future student of the intellectual life of our day will doubtless see that the historical writing of the nineteenth century, like the historical writing of other times, has been shaped by the pressure of social needs; will point out how it has served a certain social purpose; will perhaps admit, from his superior vantage, that much good work was done in spite of inadequate knowledge and an imperfect criticism.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Carl Becker, review of *The New History* by James Harvey Robinson, *The Dial* 53 (1912): 19.

<sup>220</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>222</sup> *ibid.*

This was the extent of Becker's historiographic discussion in his Robinson review. In addition, it contains some interesting thoughts about progress, which we will return to in the final section.

In 1913, Becker published an article in the *American Journal of Sociology*, with the unsexy title "Some Aspects of the Influence of Social Problems and Ideas Upon the Study and Writing of History." In the article, Becker attempted to further develop the argument of "Detachment" by reviewing the historical traditions of Germany, France, England, and America in the nineteenth century and discussing how the historians of each nation were influenced by the social conditions of their society. Each of these historical schools was influenced by scientific history, yet the work each school produced was very different. Again, Becker rejected the central tenets of scientism, though he framed his argument differently:

Scientific history, renouncing philosophy altogether, aimed to free itself from the taint of teleological explanation, and set about studying the past "as something worth knowing for itself and the truth's sake." ... But after all, why study the dead past for its own sake? Precisely for the sake of the present! And this paradox concealed an initial prepossession and a philosophy. To study the past for its own sake, without prepossessions, was itself a prepossession.<sup>223</sup>

In the final sentence, we again taste flavors of Turner's thinking (the question is not whether or not you have a philosophy of history, but whether the philosophy you have is good for anything). Becker's position in this 1913 article is sound, but nowhere near as biting as the initial declamation in "Detachment," nor as succinctly clear as his later work.

Later in 1913, Becker reviewed a book titled *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century*. The book's author, G.P. Gooch, was a writer in the scientific school, attempting a survey and assessment of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's historical output. Becker, of course, was critical of the task at hand: "the salient characteristic of this somewhat naïve and altogether pleasant conception of history ... is in supposing that the past can be known in some ultimately true and

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<sup>223</sup> Carl Becker, "Some Aspects of the Influence of Social Problems and Ideas Upon the Study and Writing of History," *American Journal of Sociology* 18, no. 5 (March 1913): 661.

final manner.<sup>224</sup> Gooch had neglected to systematize his discussion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century historians; Becker viewed this as a symptom of his scientism:

It helps to explain his lack of interest in the sort of synthetic treatment suggested above. For if one already possesses, in the “scientific method,” a standard of value for measuring and assessing historical work, it matters little in what order the masters of the craft are presented for the test, or whether they are seen in their proper social setting. The social setting is all important if one seeks an explanation rather than a judgment. But Mr. Gooch seeks ... to “assess,” the historians of the century. His primary interest is in determining to what extent any actual historian has approached to a kind of ideal historian.<sup>225</sup>

Becker used this review as another opportunity to present his historical theory, again reframed. Gooch’s book, a scientific history of the scientific historians, was a unique opportunity to directly address the scientific establishment. Yet the review was published in a popular journal, *The Nation*; and again, Becker provoked little reaction from his peers.

In February 1914, just months before a young Yugoslavian nationalist would spark the largest war the world had yet seen, Becker published a review of a series of lectures on American ideals. The lectures were directed against materialistic interpretations of social science. Becker was sympathetic:

A famous professor of economics, in examining a candidate for the doctor’s degree on one occasion, began with the following question:

“Suppose a man and a dog with two biscuits, [are] cast away at sea in a small boat; what would the man do?”

I dare say the fascination of a certain kind of Political Economy arises from the fact that you can say straight off precisely what the man would do. But if such questions have any meaning, then life has none, and history has none.<sup>226</sup>

Perhaps a bit of a harsh assessment of the more quantifiable social sciences, but Becker’s point was clear. History, and life more generally, cannot be reduced to a structure of independently-

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<sup>224</sup> Carl Becker, review of *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* by G.P. Gooch, *The Nation* 97, no. 2514 (1913): 209.

<sup>225</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> Carl Becker, review of *The Power of Ideals in American History* by Ephraim Douglass Adams, *The Dial* (1914): 141.

understood events which occur in series. Exercises that crammed life into such a structure were meaningless. Becker continued:

You have to know the man and the dog and the biscuits, the kind of boat, on what sea it was, and the season of the year. Put St. Augustine in the boat, and I should say that he would give both biscuits to the dog ... But if it happened to be Bill Sykes in the boat, I should say that he would certainly eat both biscuits himself and afterwards, perhaps, the dog also.<sup>227</sup>

The meaning in history comes from the relationships between things, the context surrounding and supporting each event. Historians search out this meaning, and amplify it by relating the events to themselves and their time. Again, Becker highlighted to the issue of selection:

History will readily furnish us both these extremes [i.e. Augustine and Sykes], and between them a great variety of possible courses. But if this variety makes history interesting, it also makes it difficult. Extremely so; so difficult that it is impossible to enter into it in any intimate way, much less to describe it, without selecting, out of the countless number of actual situations, certain situations of a special kind, and emphasizing, in order to understand these situations, the purposes or motives which seem to be most important.<sup>228</sup>

Four years on, Becker was arguing the same points that he outlined in “Detachment.” Selection and emphasis were crucial, inescapable components of a historian’s work, and “selection and emphasis constitute an interpretation.”<sup>229</sup> It was interpretation that made history meaningful. Meaning was crucial to Becker; without faith in religion or in a scientific standard of value, it was all that kept him from slipping into nihilism. As I have previously discussed, Becker refrained from explicitly defining “meaning.”<sup>230</sup> He knew that the term was slippery and subjective, and he was not interested in engaging in an abstracted exploration of what “meaning” meant. He took it as a given that his audience would understand “meaning,” and he used the concept as an alternative to an objective standard of value. People were interested in a wide

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<sup>227</sup> *ibid.*; Becker is referring to Bill Sykes in Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*

<sup>228</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>230</sup> see p. 72

variety of things, and people wanted to learn about what they found interesting. Historians, being people, had their own interests, all of course conditioned by their social climate, and they wrote about the things that interested them. When historians did quality work on an interesting topic, the result was meaningful. As interests shifted and climates changed, previous histories would grow more or less meaningful in relation to the present.

This view, of course, was not without its problems, which we will examine in the final section. These difficulties would dog Becker in the aftermath of the First World War, and more and more during the long buildup to World War II. But in the quiet years prior to these conflicts, Becker could afford to let these problems lie. Besides, no one was listening to his theories in the first place.

World War I exploded on July 28, 1914 with the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand. As Europe descended into war, the American academy continued to chug along much as it had in decades previous. Becker, still teaching at Kansas, was unmoved by the initial outbreak of conflict. Prior to the American entry into the war in 1917, he published only one essay on the conflict – “German Historians and the Great War” – in which he criticized the contributions of the German historians towards the development of an extremely strong sense of German nationalism.<sup>231</sup> After the U.S. entered the war, Becker committed to the war effort. In 1918, he moved to Washington in order to work for the Creel Committee on Public Information.<sup>232</sup> For the Creel Committee, Becker wrote two pamphlets – “German Attempts to Divide Belgium” and “America’s War Aims and Peace Program” – the latter of which was widely distributed and won the admiration of Woodrow Wilson, who reviewed and returned it

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<sup>231</sup> “German Historians and the Great War”

<sup>232</sup> Wilkins, 128

with “unhesitating approval.”<sup>233</sup> Becker aligned with Wilson’s peace program and the Fourteen Points. Although the Great War had been truly terrible, perhaps the Allied success, tempered by Wilson’s commitment to peace without victory, could engender a triumph of liberalism and social advancement. This, at least, was the hope.

One more wartime development of note – in 1916, Becker was invited to take a position at the University of Minnesota. He accepted and departed from Kansas, where he had been teaching for 14 years. Becker did not have much time to settle in at Minnesota, however, as he then offered a job at Cornell University that December.<sup>234</sup> Becker took the job at Cornell, where he would remain for the rest of his career.

The peace, when it came, was devastating. Wilkins gives a good summary:

The election in 1918 returned to Congress a Republican majority, with whom Wilson could not cooperate; the Paris Peace Conference at the end of the war showed that the victorious Allies were not so disinterested as Wilson or Becker had imagined ... The one thing [Wilson] had got of real consequence ... had been the League of Nations.<sup>235</sup>

Becker, who had tied his hopes to Wilson’s peace proposals, felt betrayed. His friend and colleague, William Dodd, at the time a Professor of American History at the University of Chicago, wrote a biography of Wilson in 1920. Dodd sent a copy to Becker, which precipitated a tense correspondence between the two men. In his preface, Dodd drew a favorable comparison between Wilson, Lincoln, and Jefferson. Dodd was generally sympathetic to Wilson and his limited position at Versailles: “No man from America could have overthrown European governments and dictated even the divinest [sic] of principles, with the congress of the United

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<sup>233</sup> Wilson to Creel, quoted in Wilkins, 128-9

<sup>234</sup> Wilkins, 96-97

<sup>235</sup> Wilkins, 129

States refusing even to grant a hundred million dollars to starving Europeans lest the Germans get some of it!”<sup>236</sup>

Becker held a less generous estimate of the President. The failure to produce a just peace at Versailles had a profound effect on Becker. In his reply to Dodd, he noted that:

The war and what has come out of it has carried me very rapidly along certain lines of thought which have always been more congenial to my temperament than to yours. I have always been susceptible to the impression of the futility of life, and always easily persuaded to regard history as no more than the meaningless resolution of blind forces which struggling men – good men and bad – do not understand and cannot control, although they amuse themselves with the pleasing illusion that they do. The war and the peace (God save the mark!) have only immensely deepened this pessimism.<sup>237</sup>

As he recognized himself, Becker always had a melancholy tendency. In the parlance of my time, it is likely that he would have been identified as a depressive. Becker’s impression of futility had been latent for most of the 1900s and 1910s. The horror of the war and the failure of the peace intensified his gloom. In his letter to Dodd, Becker decried the absurdity of the entire endeavor:

It is of course easy to explain the war in the terms of sequences of events or the conflict of interests, or the excited state of the public mind, etc. But in itself the war is inexplicable on any ground of reason, or common sense, or decent aspiration, or even of intelligent self interest; on the contrary it was as a whole the most futile and aimless, the most desolating and repulsive exhibition of human power and cruelty without compensating advantage that has ever been on earth.<sup>238</sup>

The war was something beyond comprehension – a contest fought without morality to no one’s advantage. Becker, already suspicious of the sunny idealism of the doctrine of Progress, now rejected it completely:

This is the result of some thousands of years of what men like to speak of as “political, economic, intellectual, and moral Progress.” If this is progress, what in Heaven’s name would retardation be!<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Dodd to Becker, June 14<sup>th</sup> 1920 p. 2-3 Box 7

<sup>237</sup> Becker to Dodd June 17<sup>th</sup> 1920 p. 1 Box 7

<sup>238</sup> *ibid.* p. 1-2

<sup>239</sup> *ibid.* p. 2



Becker headed away from the idealism of his Enlightenment heroes, and retreated instead into some sort of deterministic fatalism:

The conclusion I draw is not that the world is divided into good men and bad, intelligent and ignorant, and that all will be well when the bad men are circumvented and the ignorant are enlightened. This old eighteenth century view is too naïve and simple. Neither good men nor bad men wanted this war (although some men may have wanted a war); yet neither good men nor bad were able to prevent it; nor are they now apparently able to profit by their experience to the extent of taking the most obvious precautions against a repetition of it. The conclusion I draw is that for good men and bad, ignorant and enlightened (even as enlightened as Mr. Wilson), reason and aspiration and emotion – what we call principles, faith, and ideals – are without their knowing it at the service of complex and subtle instinctive reactions and impulses.<sup>240</sup>

It is necessary to note here that despite Becker's rejection of his long-held liberal principles and commitment to a subtle determinism, he never abandoned the distinction between good men and bad men. Becker's preservation of his morality, even in his darkest moments, is at the crux of the dilemma he faced. Here, as he espoused a fatalistic philosophy, he retained his belief that some men are good and others bad. More generally, throughout the development of Becker's relativism, he remained continually attached to his liberal principles. But more on this later.

It was not only the war that was awful, nor was it Wilson's broken peace. The politicians opposed to Wilson were as false as him: "their talk about these things is unreal talk. It is pureile [sic] talk. In a word, it is bunk."<sup>241</sup> Becker broadened the scope of his discontent:

And this is why I cannot get up any enthusiasm for or against the treaty or the league, for or against Wilson ... The other night I attended [sic] a concert by your Chicago orchestra; and as I listened to these men what came over me with overwhelming force was the honesty and genuineness of what they were doing. The same is true of all genuine art, scholarship, craftsmanship, and of all human activity which has for its primary object the creation of something beautiful or useful, or the discovery of some truth, or the doing of something helpful to others. But the most of politics, and much of business, has none of these for their primary object; their primary object is the gaining of some advantage over

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<sup>240</sup> *ibid.* p. 2; Becker's emphasis

<sup>241</sup> *ibid.* p. 3

others; and hence there is a subtle taint of unreality and accordingly of dishonesty about these enterprises that warps and falsifies the minds of their followers.<sup>242</sup>

This, perhaps, was as close as Becker would ever come to expressing what he understood meaning to be. Something meaningful was genuine and honest, it was beautiful and true, it was helpful and useful. To Becker, these were the qualities that good history, indeed good *anything*, possessed. Politics and business had them only in short supply, and the war shattered Becker's faith that they would find more anytime soon.

Becker closed his cynical letter to Dodd on a self-effacing note:

What really irritates me, I will confess to you, is that I could have been naïve enough to suppose, during the war, that Wilson could ever accomplish those ideal objects which are so well formulated in his state papers. A man of any intelligence, who has been studying history for 25 years, and to some purpose if I am to believe your opinion of him, should have known that in this war, as in all wars, men would profess to be fighting for justice and liberty, but in the end would demand the spoils of victory if they won. It was futile from the beginning to suppose that a new international order could be founded on the old national order.<sup>243</sup>

Here Becker not only rejected his faith in liberalism and progress, but also admonished himself for keeping such faith in the first place. Cool-eyed, cold-hearted cynicism was the only realistic way to view the world of politics, business, and war.

Becker was upset with Wilson and upset with himself, but his animus was truly directly against the system that spawned the war in the first place. Writing to Dodd three years after the Peace had been ratified, Becker was more collected than in his 1920 correspondence, if not more optimistic: "When Wilson came back I had a grudge against him which lasted for some time. I was indignant at something I supposed he had done or left undone ... When he failed, I was angry because I had failed to see that he must fail, and took it out on Wilson. But that is all over

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<sup>242</sup> *ibid.* p. 3

<sup>243</sup> *ibid.* p. 4

...”<sup>244</sup> Dodd replied with an air of closure: “I know you and I both became tremendously concerned in the great drama of 1914-1920.”<sup>245</sup> On Wilson, Dodd remained kind in his assessment: “The Wilson whom we saw and who became known to the world by his stubborn and dogmatic attitude after August 1919 is not the Wilson who set the Fourteen Points going or the man with whom I talked in the heyday of his hope and aspiration on September 13, 1918.”<sup>246</sup> Dodd was referring to a meeting which President Wilson had hosted in honor of the country’s “patriotic historians.” Becker, Dodd, and several other historians briefly met with the President, sometime after his breakdown. In a later letter to Frederick Lewis Allen, Becker recalled his impression of Wilson from the meeting:

He talked to us for half an hour, to all appearance with his customary vividness, sense of humor, etc. But I noticed that his mind did not make transitions easily. He would talk for five minutes of something ... Then he would drop it, and be silent, until he thought, or someone suggested, some other topic. He seemed a man at bay: desperately fighting still, but now what he was fighting for was really to hold on to the conviction that he hadn’t wholly failed. I recall his saying “But we’ve got the League – they can’t take that away from me.”<sup>247</sup>

The Wilson Becker met was not a fit subject for antipathy. He was a broken man, unable to carry on a conversation, much less willfully betray his nation or his ideals. In his letter to Allen, Becker recalled that Wilson had some interesting things to say regarding the writing of history:

[He said] that a fault of historians was to assume that the actors in great events knew as much about everything and what was coming in the future as the historian did himself. If he had to write history again, he would try to know as little as possible about what happened ... then he might see it more as people did who were living it.<sup>248</sup>

Not completely in line with Becker’s thinking, perhaps, but interesting enough to be remembered a decade later.

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<sup>244</sup> Becker to Dodd, February 26<sup>th</sup> 1923, in Kammen, 87

<sup>245</sup> Dodd to Becker, March 1<sup>st</sup> 1923, p. 1 Box 8

<sup>246</sup> *ibid.* p. 1-2 Box 8

<sup>247</sup> Becker to Allen, March 19<sup>th</sup> 1933, p. 3-4 Box 8; Becker’s emphasis

<sup>248</sup> *ibid.* p. 4 Box 8; Becker’s emphasis

Such was Becker's relationship to the First War – a patriotic commitment to his nation during its time of trial, followed by immense disgust and disillusionment when his nation behaved as victorious nations do. The brutal warfare and failed peace agreements darkened his views on idealism and social progress, and reinforced his conviction that scientific history was folly. Becker would remain in this dark mood for much of the 1920s, and his doubts and cynicism would compound as he later faced destabilization and tyranny in the 1930s.

### *What Are Historical Facts?*

The 1920s were not a happy time for Becker. In addition to his disillusionment with Wilson and the establishment over the war, he was troubled by chronic stomach ulcers and recurring bouts of depression.<sup>249</sup> In 1924, he underwent a major operation to alleviate his stomach ailment. He then took his first (and only) trip to Europe, where he toured England, France, and the Netherlands in the company of some colleagues from Cornell.<sup>250</sup> Becker found Europe to be charming and restful (he had taken the trip in order to recover from his operation and depression).

Due to these adverse conditions, the 1920s were a low point in Becker's scholarly output. After seeing his wartime publications through the press, Becker entered a lull that persisted until the 1930s. He continued to teach, speak, and write reviews, but he prepared no major works for publication. He did not stop adjusting his historical theory though. In April of 1926, Becker gave a presentation to the Research Club of Cornell titled "What Are Historical Facts?" This talk was the second strong statement of his historiography. In it, the effects of disillusionment, pessimism,

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<sup>249</sup> Wilkins, 141; Kammen, 91

<sup>250</sup> See Kammen, 89-99

and depression are clear. “What Are Historical Facts?” was the most radical historiographic position Becker would ever take.

In the piece, Becker reframed his relativist critique, attempting to pin down the nature of history with three questions: what, where, and when is the historical fact? His new position generally aligned with the thoughts he expressed in “Detachment,” but key alterations showed movement towards a more pessimistic, thorough relativism. It is worth noting that “What Are Historical Facts,” unlike “Detachment,” was not intended as a direct critique of scientific history, but instead as an attempt to formulate a freestanding theory of history.

In his usual style, Becker promised to “ask the questions, I can’t promise to answer them.”<sup>251</sup> Yet Becker provided quite thorough answers to each. His first question was the main one: what is the historical fact? He began his answer with an example:

“In the year 49 B.C. Caesar crossed the Rubicon.” A familiar fact this is, known to all, and obviously of some importance since it is mentioned in every history of the great Caesar. But is this fact as simple as it sounds? ... the crossing must surely have been accompanied by many acts and many words and many thoughts of many men. That is to say, a thousand and one lesser “facts” went to make up the one simple fact that Caesar crossed the Rubicon ... It is the statement that is simple – a simple generalization of a thousand and one facts.<sup>252</sup>

Having established that his example fact (and thus every historical fact) is a generalization of smaller facts, Becker proceeded to place the generalization in a contextual web:

This simple fact *has* strings tied to it, and that is why it has been treasured for two thousand years. It is tied by these strings to innumerable other facts, so that it can’t mean anything except by losing its clear outline. It can’t mean anything except as it is absorbed into the complex web of circumstances which brought it into being.<sup>253</sup>

This “complex web of circumstances” was incredibly important; it was the vehicle that imbued facts with meaning. “Facts” were facts because they were meaningful, and facts were meaningful

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<sup>251</sup> Becker, *Detachment*, 43

<sup>252</sup> *ibid.*, 43-44

<sup>253</sup> *ibid.*, 44-45; Becker’s emphasis

because they were inextricably tied up in a web of context, a web which extended to the present day, linking present to past. “Apart from these great events and complicated relations, the crossing of the Rubicon means nothing, is not an historical fact properly speaking at all. In itself it is nothing for us; it becomes something for us, not in itself, but as a symbol of something else.”<sup>254</sup> In “Detachment,” Becker had referred to historical facts as “images.”<sup>255</sup> Here, he changed terms. Not “image,” but instead “a *symbol*, a simple statement which is a generalization of a thousand and one simpler facts which we do not for the moment care to use.”<sup>256</sup> The shift was telling. “Image” usually refers to a representation of something material and solid. A figure in a photograph is an image of someone who actually existed. The connotations surrounding “symbol” are different. “Symbols” are generally used to solidify something abstract. Concepts are symbolized, not individuals. Becker was well aware of this connotation; the historical fact was “a symbol standing for a long series of events which have to do with the most intangible and immaterial realities.”<sup>257</sup> As he had thought in 1910, Becker in 1926 maintained that the present was completely separated from the past. Yet his terminology here underscored the distance between present and past, and the unreality of the historical fact.

Indeed, the historical fact did not need to align with the past in any real way. Becker gave the example of the German Mark:<sup>258</sup>

The German Mark was the product of the historian’s fertile imagination working on a few sentences in Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* and a few passages in a book called *Germania* written by Tacitus ... The German Mark of the historians was largely a myth, corresponding to no reality. The German Mark was nevertheless an historical fact.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> *ibid.*, 45

<sup>255</sup> See p. 64

<sup>256</sup> Becker, *Detachment*, 45

<sup>257</sup> *ibid.*, 45

<sup>258</sup> A common currency used among ancient Germanic tribes, postulated by 19<sup>th</sup> century German historians. Not to be confused with currency of the Weimar Republic.

<sup>259</sup> *ibid.*, 46

Yet if the historical fact could symbolize things real and unreal, how could the right facts be separated from the wrong? Defining historical facts as symbols was insufficient for this task.

Becker proceeded to formulate an alternate definition:

The historian may be interested in anything that has to do with the life of man in the past ... Very well, the historian is interested in some event of this sort. Yet he cannot deal directly with this event itself, since the event itself has disappeared. What he can deal with directly is a *statement about the event*. He deals in short not with the event, but with a statement which affirms *the fact that the event occurred*. When we really get down to the hard facts, what the historian is always dealing with is an *affirmation* – an affirmation of the fact that something is true.<sup>260</sup>

Not only was the historical fact a symbol of a past event, it was an affirmation of that event.

German historians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were able to discuss the German Mark because they were continually affirming it to be true. Historians in the present day can no longer seriously discuss the Mark, as we no longer consider it true. Its advocates, its affirmers, have all left, and the potency of that particular historical fact has left with them. It is tempting to think that we no longer discuss the German Mark because we have arrived at a fuller understanding of history; but we are confined to our present just as our 19<sup>th</sup> century compatriots were confined to theirs. We do not know all of the flaws of our arguments; there may well be (and most likely are) concepts we now all hold to be true which are overthrown in the next century.

Yet Becker was making an even broader point than this. By his 1926 conception, one account of history could not be any more or less truthful than another. He stated this explicitly:

Of a symbol it is hardly worthwhile to say that it is cold or hard. It is dangerous to say even that it is true or false. The safest thing to say about a symbol is that it is more or less appropriate.<sup>261</sup>

Thus one history could not be more accurate than another. It could only be more popular. This did not mean that Becker thought all histories were of equal quality. It simply meant that

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<sup>260</sup> *ibid.*, 47; Becker's emphasis

<sup>261</sup> *ibid.*

accuracy and truth were not his selecting criteria. As I have been arguing, Becker conceived as history as a literary construction constrained by the extant evidence. Literary constructions are evaluated on the basis of meaning: “good” literature is literature that means something; “bad” literature is trite or banal or overcomplicated or unfeeling, all terms that speak to a fundamental lack of meaning. Becker applied this literary criterion of meaning to the historian’s work. It was unimportant whether or not a history was accurate, because historical accuracy was merely alignment with the affirmed historical topography of the historian’s time. To be taken seriously as history, a work had to reference and align with the affirmed historical facts (i.e. a historian could not posit that Hannibal crossed the alps on the back of a unicorn), but that was a constraint, not a goal. Beyond this, history was only as good as it was meaningful, and that was a contextual, subjective criterion by its nature.

Becker’s next question was the where: where is the historical fact? He answered, “I will say at once, however brash it sounds, that the historical fact is in someone’s mind or it is nowhere.”<sup>262</sup> He employed another well-known example:

“Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in Ford’s Theater in Washington on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April, 1865.” That *was* an actual event, occurrence, fact at the moment of happening. But speaking now, in the year 1926, we say it *is* an historical fact.<sup>263</sup>

Becker highlighted a common practice in everyday speech, a difference in tense usage: “We say that it *was* an actual event, but *is now* an historical fact.”<sup>264</sup> This was the same distinction between the actual past and history that he had drawn in “Detachment,” only now Becker was using linguistic support to demonstrate its acceptance in everyday language.

The most obvious objection to locating historical facts in the mind was to bring up the source material. Becker anticipated this and addressed it:

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<sup>262</sup> *ibid.*, 47-48

<sup>263</sup> *ibid.*, 48; Becker’s emphasis

<sup>264</sup> *ibid.*; Becker’s emphasis



Ah, but they are in the records, in the sources, I hear someone say. Yes, in a sense, they are in the sources. The historical fact of Lincoln's assassination is in the records ... but in what sense? The records are after all only paper, over the surface of which ink has been distributed in certain patterns. And even these patterns were not made by the actual occurrence, the assassination of Lincoln. The patterns are themselves only "histories" of the event, made by someone who had in *his* mind an image or idea of Lincoln's assassination ... But if there were now no one in the world who could make any meaning out of the patterned records or sources, the fact of Lincoln's assassination would cease to be an historical fact.<sup>265</sup>

Another objection was as follows:

But perhaps you will say that the assassination of Lincoln has made a difference in the world, and that this difference is now effectively working, even if for a moment, or an hour or a week, no one in the world has the image of the actual occurrence in mind.<sup>266</sup>

Becker agreed that the historical fact would persist even if not continually actively recalled by someone. But he held that the fact remained in the mind, in the memory, nonetheless:

It is precisely because people have long memories, and have constantly formed images in the minds of the assassination of Lincoln, that the universe contains the historical fact which persists as well as the actual event which does not persist. It is the persisting historical fact, rather than the ephemeral actual event, which makes a difference to us now; and the historical fact makes a difference only because it is, and so far as it is, in human minds.<sup>267</sup>

Becker's third question easily followed from the second: when is the historical fact? His answer was clear enough, "if the historical fact is present, imaginatively, in someone's mind, then it is now, a part of the present."<sup>268</sup> Yet this was an unsatisfying answer, for what was the present? "The word present is a slippery word, and the thing itself is worse than the word. The present is an indefinable point in time, gone before you can think it; the image or idea which I have now present in mind slips instantly into the past."<sup>269</sup> Of the three questions, Becker's reply to "when?" was the weakest. His analysis of the nature of the present was underdeveloped; he

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<sup>265</sup> *ibid.*, 49; Becker's emphasis

<sup>266</sup> *ibid.*, 49-50

<sup>267</sup> *ibid.*, 50

<sup>268</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>269</sup> *ibid.*

followed it with a discussion of memory that was also inadequate.<sup>270</sup> However, the weakness of his third analysis is unimportant to his main points, as each of the three questions were intended to get at the same issue from different avenues.

Having asked and answered his three questions, Becker summarized his main point: “In truth the actual past is gone; and the world of history is an intangible world, re-created imaginatively, and present in our minds.”<sup>271</sup> This point appeared in his earlier essay “Detachment,” though it was not phrased as neatly, as it was obscured by his attempt to engage the scientific historical establishment directly and critique the several of its underlying assumptions. Here, Becker framed the issue independent of the scientific, and strongly emphasized the unreality and intangibility of history. This sentence was the clearest, most forceful formulation of his historiography.

Becker used the rest of the piece to discuss the implications attached to his conception of history. He identified five: (1) historians cannot present any actual event in its entirety; (2) historians cannot eliminate “the personal equation,”<sup>272</sup> their personal experiences and judgments play into the selections they make in their writings; (3) “no one can profit by historical research, or not much, unless he does some for himself,”<sup>273</sup> i.e. unlike the natural sciences, which can yield positive benefits to everyone, regardless of understanding, history must be understood in order to be beneficial; (4) [and “more important than the others”!] “every normal person – every man, woman, and child – does know some history, enough for his immediate purposes,”<sup>274</sup> essentially

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<sup>270</sup> Becker would expand his discussion of nature of the present in *City*, he borrowed the idea of the specious present from philosophy (see n. 299). He framed his discussion of memory with the example of “Smith’s coal bill,” an example he would further develop and refine when writing “Everyman His Own Historian.” Because the content of both examples is much the same and better expressed in “Everyman,” we will discuss it the following section (see p. 98).

<sup>271</sup> Becker, *Detachment*, 52

<sup>272</sup> *ibid.*, 56

<sup>273</sup> *ibid.*, 59

<sup>274</sup> *ibid.*, 59-60

saying that the distinction between everyday memory and scholarly history did not exist; and (5) “the kind of history that has most influence upon the life of the community and the course of events is the history that common men carry around in their heads.”<sup>275</sup> Much of this was similar to Becker’s position in the 1910s. One notable addition was the emphasis on importance on popular history and the conflation of everyday memory with academic, professional history (points (4) and (5)). Over the next five years, Becker would continue to develop this theme – it would play a central role in his AHA Presidential address “Everyman His Own Historian.”

The most significant change in Becker’s historiography from 1910 to 1926 was his conception of the relationship between history and truth. In 1910, Becker viewed history as a form of relaying things that had actually occurred in the past, albeit mediated by the historian’s biases and social conditions. To Becker in 1910, history was an attempt to draw meaning out of actual source data. By 1926, Becker had taken a strongly relativistic turn. Source data no longer provided the raw material for historical accounts; it was instead conceived of as a constraint on the story a historian could tell. Historical facts were not tied to the actual occurrences in a real way; instead, they were affirmations that these occurrences had occurred. History was thus an imaginative enterprise, conditioned by the social setting in which it was written, fundamentally based on faith – faith in the affirmations of one’s fellow historians, faith in the reliability and verifiability of the source material, and faith in the ability of these sources to yield meaningful, interesting stories. It may strike you as odd that Becker, who had early on abandoned his religious faith, later based the theory of his professional enterprise on faith. This move was sparked by the pessimism and doubt Becker suffered in the 1920s. Viewed from his moody perch, nothing was certain, nothing could be known absolutely. Yet history could certainly be useful and meaningful. This good, meaningful history had to be based in faith.

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<sup>275</sup> *ibid.*, 61

Wilkins is critical of Becker's historiographic ability: "Becker remains, however, a poor but exciting epistemologist ... his method, I feel, was useful, while his theory was hopelessly wrong."<sup>276</sup> It is true that Becker was no formal philosopher. As Wilkins notes, Becker was apparently unmoved by (or unexposed to) the works of Bertrand Russell, Moore, Ayer, Carnap, Wittgenstein, or other contemporary philosophers working on epistemology.<sup>277</sup> Becker's historical theory had fundamentally epistemic components, yet it grew out of his independent investigation of the process of writing history as a professional historian. It is likely that the systematic approach of the academic philosophers did not appeal to Becker, who preferred to read literary authors. As I have argued, Becker's central criterion for evaluating works of history was a literary criterion – meaning.<sup>278</sup> Wilkins' own objections to Becker's historiography are mostly intended to point out how thoroughly disorienting and pessimistic such a position was.<sup>279</sup> I agree with Wilkins that this position was indeed hugely problematic for Becker, and grew out of a deep pessimism. However, acknowledgment of this is no refutation of the theory itself.

Becker made no effort to publish his 1926 talk. However, those who got their hands on it were impressed. Harry Elmer Barnes later wrote that the essay would "probably come to have the same place in historical science that the theory of indeterminacy occupies in contemporary physical science."<sup>280</sup> H.L. Mencken pressed for its publication.<sup>281</sup> Becker himself was not fully confident of the position he took in "What Are Historical Facts?", and he was well aware of the problems it raised for his liberal sensibilities. In 1934, Becker wrote to his colleague Carl Van Doren, who was assembling a collection of his essays:

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<sup>276</sup> Wilkins, 208

<sup>277</sup> Wilkins, 209

<sup>278</sup> See p. 78

<sup>279</sup> Wilkins 207-208; worth keeping in mind that Wilkins is not an academic philosopher, nor am I.

<sup>280</sup> Barnes quoted in Wilkins, 201

<sup>281</sup> Wilkins, 201 n. 107

The Rochester paper has not been printed, nor will it be in the form I gave it, which was intended to provoke discussion rather than to be an exact expression of my own ideas. If anything I ever wrote on the subject of history is worth including in an anthology it will be found in the Wells article, in “Everyman his own Historian” ... “Frederick Jackson Turner” ... or the longish review of The Education of Henry Adams ...<sup>282</sup>

Curiously, Becker did not mention “Detachment and the Writing of History” in his list. Indeed,

Becker’s ranking of his historiographically-significant works is quite different from my own.

The three works I have selected (“Detachment and the Writing of History”, “What are Historical Facts?”, and “Everyman His Own Historian”) are the clearest, most focused statements of

Becker’s historiographic position. The fact that Becker selected works that addressed

historiography as a secondary theme as his most important works on the subject is a sign of his

reluctance to commit fully to his relativist position, especially in the tumult of the 1930s. Yet this

is all beside the point at hand. As demonstrated by his later letter to Van Doren and his refusal to

publish, Becker was not satisfied with the formulation of history he laid out in 1926. Over the

next five years, Becker would refine the frame of his argument before presenting it before the

American Historical Association as his presidential address, “Everyman His Own Historian.”

The substantive argument of “Everyman” in 1931, however, was the same as it was in 1926.

### *Everyman His Own Historian*

In the 1930s, Becker enjoyed an upswing of productivity and popularity. His stomach continued to trouble him, and he continued to endure bouts of depression.<sup>283</sup> Despite these

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<sup>282</sup> Becker to Van Doren, February 28<sup>th</sup> 1934, Box XX; The “Rochester paper” is “What Are Historical Facts?”, which he gave first at the Research Club, then at an AHA meeting in Rochester. The paper was eventually published posthumously.

<sup>283</sup> Becker would continue to suffer from his stomach ailment until 1940, when he underwent an intense surgery that removed three-quarters of his stomach. The surgery was a profound success; he enjoyed good health in the last years of his life (his death in 1945 was unexpected – a case of uremic poisoning). The depression would recur intermittently until his death. See Wilkins, 210;

difficulties, Becker pushed forward. His scholarly output increased dramatically – in 1931 he completed the two works that would cement his reputation as the preeminent historical mind of his day: his Presidential Address to the American Historical Association, “Everyman His Historian,” and his masterwork, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*. *The Heavenly City* was a reinterpretation of the Enlightenment; Becker proposed that eighteenth-century freethinkers were far more indebted to the intellectual climate of Christian Europe than they acknowledged. As he put it, “the *Philosophes* demolished the Heavenly City of St. Augustine only to rebuild it with more up-to-date materials.”<sup>284</sup> *The Heavenly City* was both a powerful reinterpretation of the Enlightenment and a work tinged with historical theory – Becker dedicated substantial passages to theoretical discussions only casually related to his central thesis. “Everyman His Own Historian” was more direct – a refined, publicized statement of the historiography he had laid down in 1926 with “What Are Historical Facts?”

“What Are Historical Facts?” was Becker’s most radical historiographic work; “Everyman His Own Historian” was his most popular. It may indeed be the case, as Becker later thought, that “What Are Historical Facts?” was not “an exact expression” of his historical ideas, while “Everyman” was.<sup>285</sup> However, the content of each piece was much the same, only the tone and emphasis were substantively different. Part of this shift can be attributed to Becker’s audience – in 1926, he was speaking to small groups of learned colleagues; his 1931 address was a public statement, addressed to the profession at large and beyond, to the general populace and to posterity. The shift in tone was also the result of Becker’s growing realization of the problematic implications of his relativism, which by 1930 were cast in an exceedingly harsh light

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<sup>284</sup> Becker, *Heavenly City*, 31

<sup>285</sup> Becker to Van Doren, February 28<sup>th</sup> 1934, Box 9; see p. 92-3

by the rise of totalitarian movements in Europe and Russia. The tension of Becker's position will be discussed in the following section, let us now turn to the substance of his 1931 works.

"Everyman His Own Historian" was the most constructive formulation of Becker's historiography. His direct critique of the scientific historical school was almost entirely absent. This movement from critical to constructive is a persistent, regular trend in Becker's formulations of historiography. By 1931, the scientific school had long been in decline, and Becker no longer needed to actively attack it. More interesting was the elusive nature of history itself, immune to criticism.<sup>286</sup>

Becker opened his address with a skill from his grade-school days: "Once upon a time, long long ago, I learned how to reduce a fraction to its lowest terms ... [this] taught me that in order to understand the essential nature of anything it is well to strip it of all superficial and irrelevant accretions – in short, to reduce it to its lowest terms."<sup>287</sup> A couple of notable things here: with "Once upon a time," Becker opened his address like a story, indeed a fairy tale. This was keeping with his fundamental conception of history as literature, a conception he would soon make explicit. And by beginning his address with a simple grade-school exercise, Becker was trying to make his subject as accessible as possible. Most everyone, indeed "Everyman," had at one time or another had to learn their fractions, and similarly, as Becker would argue, everyone had learned their history.

Having outlined of his goal of understanding by reduction to the lowest terms, Becker proceeded: "That operation I now venture, with some apprehension and all due apologies, to perform on the subject of history."<sup>288</sup> First, however, some housekeeping was in order. Becker again drew the distinction between the actual past and history. "When I use the term history I

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<sup>286</sup> See "What is Historiography?"

<sup>287</sup> Becker, *Everyman*, 233

<sup>288</sup> *ibid.*

mean knowledge of history. No doubt throughout all past time there actually occurred a series of events, which whether we know what it was or not, constitutes history in some ultimate sense. Nevertheless, much the greater part of these events we can know nothing about.”<sup>289</sup> And again he asserted that the historical we know were affirmations that exist in the present, though he did not dwell long on this point: “The event *was*, but is no longer; it is only the affirmed fact about the event that *is*, that persists, and will persist until we discover that our affirmation is wrong or inadequate.”<sup>290</sup> So far, all of this was the same as it was in “What Are Historical Facts?”, yet what had taken Becker ten pages in 1926 he here laid out in two paragraphs. These assertions were not widely accepted by the historical establishment, indeed they were radically relativist, yet they supported all that followed in the address, and Becker was eager to set up the bulk of his argument.<sup>291</sup>

Having made his crucial assumptions, Becker proceeded to formulate a definition of history, something he had always been reluctant to do:

It is history in this sense [present-tense history] that I wish to reduce to its lowest terms. In order to do that I need a very simple definition. I once read that “History is the knowledge of events that have occurred in the past.” That is a simple definition, but not simple enough. It contains three words that require examination.<sup>292</sup>

These three words were “knowledge,” “events,” and “past.” Becker found alternate words – instead of knowledge, memory; and instead of events, things said and done. “In the past” he dropped altogether. His reformulated, equally-succinct definition read: “History is the memory of things said and done.”<sup>293</sup> With this definition, Becker obliterated the pretensions that professional historians used to separate themselves from the common man. It might be

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<sup>289</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>290</sup> *ibid.*, 234; Becker’s emphasis

<sup>291</sup> Indeed, most later critiques of Becker’s relativism focus on the assertions he made in these first few paragraphs. See Zagorin, Wilkins, Strout; Hexter shows a deeper awareness of Becker’s dilemma.

<sup>292</sup> Becker, *Everyman*, 234; I have been unable to locate where Becker might have read this definition of history.

<sup>293</sup> *ibid.*, 235



reasonably assumed that only historians could maintain a substantial “knowledge of events,” but it was easy to see how everyone had some “memory of things said and done.” That everyone knew some history was another of Becker’s central points, here emphasized more strongly than in 1926.

To demonstrate how the ordinary citizen used history, Becker told a short story about “Mr. Everyman” attempting to pay his coal bill. Becker had used the same example near the end of “What Are Historical Facts?”, but here he extended it. Mr. Everyman does archival research at “his little Private Record Office (I mean his vest pocket),”<sup>294</sup> he forms a picture of coal wagons delivering coal to his house, he even is able to reconcile a disagreement between his source material and that of the coal seller with “a critical comparison of the texts ... in order to eliminate error.”<sup>295</sup> The research was completed when the bill was paid and all parties were content. “Since his mind rests satisfied, Mr. Everyman has found the explanation of the series of events that concerned.”<sup>296</sup> This was hugely relativist – Mr. Everyman never determined the absolute truth of the transaction, nor did he uncover all the details surrounding it. Instead, he constructed a story that explained the situation to his satisfaction, a story that had a purpose, a story that changed as he reconciled the extant source materials. According to Becker, this was the project of history, both common and professional.

Having outlined his basic conception of history, Becker proceeded to discuss a couple of “the more general implications of Mr. Everyman’s activities.”<sup>297</sup> The first of these was the nature of past, present, and future. Becker had touched on this idea in 1926, but only developed it strongly in 1931. His conception centered on “the specious present,” an idea he had borrowed

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<sup>294</sup> *ibid.*, 237

<sup>295</sup> *ibid.*, 239

<sup>296</sup> *ibid.*, 238-239

<sup>297</sup> *ibid.*, 239

from philosophy.<sup>298</sup> Becker discussed the concept both in *The Heavenly City* and in “Everyman,” his discussion in *City* is more involved. He explained:

Past and future are two time regions which we commonly separate by a third which we call the present. But strictly speaking the present does not exist, or is at best no more than an infinitesimal point in time, gone before we can note it as present. Nevertheless we must have a present; and so we get one by robbing the past, by holding on to the most recent events and pretending that they all belong to our immediate perceptions.<sup>299</sup>

In “Everyman,” Becker related the specious present to history:

The extent to which the specious present may thus be enlarged and enriched will depend upon knowledge, the artificial extension of memory, the memory of things said and done in the past and distant places. But not upon knowledge alone; rather upon knowledge directed by purpose. The specious present is an unstable pattern of thought ... At any given moment each one of us (professional historian no less than Mr. Everyman) weaves into this unstable pattern such actual or artificial memories as may be necessary to orient us in our little world of endeavor.<sup>300</sup>

Simply put, we employ the specious present to center ourselves and contextualize our purposes.

Our specious present is expanded and twisted and bent in order to make a sensible story out of the world and our place in it. Even more simply put, we use history to make things meaningful:

History in this sense cannot be reduced to a verifiable set of statistics or formulated in terms of universally valid mathematical formulas. It is rather an imaginative creation, a personal possession which each one of us, Mr. Everyman, fashions out of his individual experience, adapts to his practical or emotional needs, and adorns as well as may be to suit his aesthetic tastes.<sup>301</sup>

Here Becker was explicit: history was imagination, a form of literature. As he had maintained throughout his career, pursuit of some final, universal history was folly, as history was wholly dependent on its author and audience.

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<sup>298</sup> In both “Everyman” and *The Heavenly City*, Becker mentioned that philosophers had developed the concept of the specious present, though he never makes a specific attribution. Perhaps he had found the concept in William James or one of his adherents. James had written about the specious present in his *Principles of Psychology*.

<sup>299</sup> Becker, *The Heavenly City*, 119

<sup>300</sup> Becker, *Everyman*, 241

<sup>301</sup> *ibid.*, 243

A central point of *The Heavenly City* was the influence of society on individual thinkers. The Enlightenment thinkers remained under the influence of currents of longstanding Christian thought despite their loud rejection of the Christian establishment. Becker borrowed the term “climates of opinion” from Whitehead to describe this phenomenon.<sup>302</sup> Climates of opinion had implication for his historiography as well:

It must then be obvious that living history, the ideal series of events that we affirm and hold in memory, since it is so intimately associated with what we are doing and with what we hope to do, cannot be precisely the same for all at any given time, or the same for one generation as for another.<sup>303</sup>

As each writer was influenced by their social climate, each piece of writing was similarly a product of its time and place. More succinctly, “it is impossible to divorce history from life.”<sup>304</sup> Even Becker, giving his AHA address in 1931, was subject to this constraint. He was well-aware of the self-consuming nature of his position:

I do not present this view of history as one that is stable and must prevail. Whatever validity it may claim, it is certain, on its own premises, to be supplanted; for its premises, imposed upon us by the climate of opinion in which we live and think, predispose us to regard all things, and all principles of things, as no more than “inconstant modes or fashions” ...<sup>305</sup>

Yet despite Becker’s awareness of his predicament, it did not stop him from strongly asserting the correctness of his position. His historiography may fair poorly in the view of some future society, but it was clear and right to Becker and his audience in 1931.

Where were the historians, the professionals, left in all of this? Here again, Becker was explicit about the literary nature of the historian’s mission:

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<sup>302</sup> See Becker, *The Heavenly City*, 5

<sup>303</sup> Becker, *Everyman* 243

<sup>304</sup> *ibid.*, 242

<sup>305</sup> *ibid.*, 254

We are thus of that ancient and honorable company of wise men of the tribe, of bards and story-tellers and minstrels, of soothsayers and priests, to whom in successive ages has been entrusted the keeping of useful myths.<sup>306</sup>

Becker understood that this framing would be off-putting to his audience, if not outright blasphemous. He was quick to temper his tone, but the implications remained:

Let not the harmless, necessary word “myth” put us out of countenance. In the history of history a myth is a once valid but now discarded version of the human story, as our now valid versions will in due course be relegated to the category of discarded myths.<sup>307</sup>

Historians were the storytellers, the interpreters of information, the instillers of meaning. This was their ultimate goal:

History in this sense is story, in aim always a true story; a story that employs all the devices of literary art ... to present the succession of events in the life of man, and from the succession of events thus presented to derive a satisfactory meaning.<sup>308</sup>

In the latter half of his “Everyman” address, Becker made explicit his long-held belief that history was for all intents and purposes a meaningful story. This belief had its roots in his early ambitions to be a writer, and was fostered as he doggedly held clean literary form and good writing to be of paramount importance throughout his career.

Interestingly, in “Everyman,” Becker maintained the distinction between truth and fiction, seemingly in the face of his radical historical theory. If historical facts were affirmations of past events, not connected to the actual past events in a real way, it would seem impossible to meaningfully pursue historical truth. The best a historian could hope to do was align with the dominant affirmations of his time, or attempt to push the dominant affirmations closer to those he held dear. Becker agreed with this, stating that “in every age the illusion is that the present version is valid because the related facts are true, whereas former versions are invalid because

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<sup>306</sup> *ibid.*, 247

<sup>307</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>308</sup> *ibid.*, 248

based upon inaccurate or inadequate facts.”<sup>309</sup> Yet Becker then stated that “our proper function is not to repeat the past but to make use of it, to correct and rationalize for common use Mr. Everyman’s mythological adaptation of what actually happened.”<sup>310</sup> As Wilkins correctly points out, Becker does not mention how historians might go about “correcting” Mr. Everyman’s mythology when all they have to work with is Mr. Everyman’s affirmations, the assumptions and biases of their climate of opinion, and the affirmations of past Everymen.<sup>311</sup> Becker seemed to hold out hope that the actual past could be known in some way, though he continually denied our ability to access it. Yet without access, how could we ever come to know it?

This contradiction has led many interpreters of Becker’s historiography to be critical of his epistemological ability, or more generally of the quality of his mind. As I am unenthusiastic about ranking the minds of authors who have read and written far more than I (in the manner of first-order, second-order, etc.), and seeing as how Becker is the hero of my story in the first place, I am disinclined to take this route. The contradiction in Becker’s historiography is clear enough, even more pronounced in “Everyman” than it was in “What Are Historical Facts?” I think it unlikely that Becker could have been unaware of this problem. It is more likely that he was reluctant to state it explicitly, especially since he could find no satisfactory resolution.

One method of resolution would have been to commit fully and loudly to a nihilistic relativism, holding that one historical account was indeed as good as any other, and there was no real, reliable method of evaluating the two. This route was abhorrent to Becker, contrary to the beliefs of his mentors and the heroes of his admired Enlightenment. It was especially loathsome to Becker in the face of the revisionist, nationalist mythologies being employed by Stalin,

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<sup>309</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>310</sup> *ibid.*, 253

<sup>311</sup> See Wilkins, 204-205

Mussolini, and Hitler. Surely their accounts of history were worse than Becker's tolerant, enlightened liberalism.

Another route would have been to attempt to reconnect the historical narrative to the actual past, even if in some secondary way. Becker had maintained the absolute separation of actual past and historical accounts since 1910. Having decoupled the two, their separation seemed patently obvious; he had thoroughly convinced himself of the correctness of his argument. To reconnect them in some way, and thus permit historians some way to know the actual past, Becker would have had to employ roundabout, abstracted philosophical methods for which he had neither the patience nor the philosophical grounding.<sup>312</sup>

Instead, Becker opted to plaster over the problem, uncritically placing the historian in the role of Mr. Everyman's fact-checker. This was due in large part to the fact that he could not see a better alternative. The decision was also influenced by the audience of his address – "Everyman" was Becker's first attempt to widely publicize his position, and he did not want to isolate his audience right off the bat. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, "Everyman" was intended for a general audience, accessible not only to the academic community, but the common reader. Becker was trying to sell his argument, to make it palatable, and pessimistic relativism was not the way to go.

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<sup>312</sup> Wilkins' analysis of Becker's historiography is entirely critical (see Wilkins, 199-209); he does not propose a method of rejoining the actual past and the historical narrative. Indeed, no critic of Becker's relativism has been able to provide a clear recoupling argument. Such an argument would be necessary in order to provide an objectivist alternative to Becker's literary-meaning method of evaluating historical accounts.

## **Epilogue – The Dilemma of Diderot**

By the mid-1930s, Carl Becker had a problem. In fact, Becker had had a problem since publishing “Detachment and the Writing of History” in 1910, but by the 30s it had grown particularly nettling. The problem can be stated simply: how could Becker simultaneously maintain his thoroughgoing relativism and the democratic, liberal values he held dear? Becker’s fame following the “Everyman” address and the continuing ascent of Nazism in Europe brought the issue to the fore. It seemed as though a firm decision would have to be made.

In 1915, Becker wrote a short essay on the French *Philosophe* Denis Diderot. In the essay, titled “The Dilemma of Diderot,” Becker addressed the question of why Diderot ceased publishing in the later decades of his life after consistently maintaining a heavy output in his earlier years. Becker interpreted the publishing fall-off as a symptom of a deeper problem: a fundamental opposition between his philosophy and his morality. This was the dilemma.

Diderot was a deeply moral man: “His devotion to virtue and morality was something more vital than the intellectual interest of a student of ethics; he wished not only to analyze virtue, but to practice it, and to induce others to practice it.”<sup>313</sup> He was “possessed of a profound faith in [virtue] as a reality, and as the most vital reality.”<sup>314</sup> In Diderot’s own words: ““There is nothing in the world ... to which virtue is not preferable.””<sup>315</sup>

Yet though Diderot held by a deep, abiding love for morality and the good life, he was unable to find a basis for this love in his philosophy. He arrived at “what may be termed vitalistic materialism.”<sup>316</sup> The universe was composed entirely of matter, implying that everything contained within it was matter as well. Thus humans, their souls, and their entire concept of

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<sup>313</sup> Becker, *Everyman*, 269

<sup>314</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>315</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>316</sup> *ibid.*, 271

morality was in the end reducible to matter. Likewise, the human ability to like and dislike, to love and hate, indeed the ability to make any sort of value-judgment at all was a result of the particular arrangement of matter within and around the judging human. Becker again quoted Diderot himself: “The soul is nothing without the body; I defy you to explain anything without the body.”<sup>317</sup>

This metaphysic was devastating to Diderot’s conception of morality: “it was one of the ironies of fate that the speculative of Diderot, of which the principal purpose was to furnish a firm foundation for natural morality, ended by destroying the foundation of all morality as he understood it.”<sup>318</sup> Becker outlined the dilemma in detail:

This was the dilemma, that if the conclusions of Diderot the speculative philosopher were valid, the aspirations of Diderot the moral man, all the vital purposes and sustaining hopes of his life, were but as the substance of a dream.<sup>319</sup>

This, Becker concluded, was why Diderot ceased publication in his later years. The speculative philosopher had won out, the moral man exhausted without a place to stand.

Becker’s problem with his historiography not only parallel the dilemma of Diderot, it effectively *is* the dilemma of Diderot. It is another of “the ironies of fate” that the man who was so able to elucidate Diderot’s dilemma would fall into the same trap in later life. Becker was convinced that his liberal values, his belief in democracy and the rights of man, were fundamentally *right*. Yet he undercut himself with his historiography. If all the evidence he to work with was merely the affirmations of previous historians; if he were completely shut out of the actual past, Becker could not draw on history to validate his beliefs. He could not demonstrate that one system of belief was truly *better* than another; indeed he could make no moral judgments at all. He could only say that systems were *different* from one another, and from

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<sup>317</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>318</sup> *ibid.*, 273

<sup>319</sup> *ibid.*



the system in which he sat, some systems appeared better and others worse. Becker acknowledged his system was not particularly special, apart from the fact that he was stuck in it. Therefore, his evaluations of other belief-systems throughout history were effectively arbitrary; all he was doing was telling pleasing tales to his Everyman.

This is all well and good in the abstract, but the rise of fascism and dictatorial communism in Europe and Russia provided a strong motivation to move away from relativism. It was not enough to meekly say that the Nazis appeared to be bad from his perspective; in the face of the Nazi menace Becker needed to strongly state that Nazism *was bad*, objectively, from any point of view. Unlike Diderot, who could not escape his reasoning capabilities, Becker took the alternate path, deemphasizing his reasoned historiography in favor of his liberal values. Becker's last two books, written during World War II, reflect this. His *New Liberties for Old* and *How New Will the Better World Be?* both affirmed the value of democratic values and had little to do with his relativistic historiography.<sup>320</sup> However, Becker never renounced his earlier historiographic statements. He was always comfortable with ambiguity, aware of the tensions and contradictions that lay in his mind, and able to tolerate them. Becker was not keen on making definitive statements on any subject, especially not regarding himself. By masking his deepest beliefs in subtlety, irony, and self-deprecation, Becker was able to navigate the dilemma – negotiating between his skeptical historical theory and his optimistic, enlightened values as best as he was able.

So here at the end of the thing, where do we find ourselves? Off the map again – this map, in any case. Carl Becker was a thinker who developed a unique, subtle conception of history; a conception that was developed over many years of study and reflection. His historiography was a product of his inherent skepticism and literary ability. These elements

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<sup>320</sup> See Wilkins, 217-221

caused him to reject religion early on, and to develop a lifelong commitment to artful writing. Becker entered into academy after the example of his mentor, Frederick Jackson Turner. He developed as a scholar first at Wisconsin, and later at Columbia, under the mentorship of Turner and Charles Haskins all the while. Under the influence of all of these conditions, he made his first strong historiographic statement in 1910, with the essay “Detachment and the Writing of History.” As he grew as a scholar and a thinker, Becker continued to refine his theory, crafting a restatement in 1926 with “What Are Historical Facts?” The finest statement of his historiography came in 1931 in the form of an AHA Presidential Address, his “Everyman His Own Historian.” Becker remained thoroughly convinced of his relativism throughout his academic career, though his relativist framework would frequently conflict with his liberal values. This tension eventually forced him to move away from relativism after the rise of European totalitarianism, downplaying his historiography and reaffirming his commitment to democracy.