

The Art of History

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Most professional historians do not understand the art of history. Quite what constitutes the ‘art’ seems to be the problem. Is it originality of thought, a distinct literary voice, innovative writing, sensitivity to public perceptions and assumptions about the past, or clarity of expression? Or something else entirely? Whatever the answer, these suggestions by themselves indicate that some of the activities associated with the ‘art’ do not figure prominently in university departments. Literary skill is almost always downgraded by academics to a supplementary role – supporting an analytical process but always subordinate to it. Originality is surprisingly rarely valued in academic circles: when it is most clearly displayed, it often proves to be the catalyst for its protagonist to be declared a ‘maverick’. No historical departments (as far as I know) encourage their members to be sensitive to public perceptions and assumptions. Few historians have actively explored what drama, suspense and literary conceits can add to a narrative. Creative writing is never discussed in historical journals, even though it is implicit in the very act of writing something new. All in all, historians seem generally oblivious to that basic fact that, when expressing ideas about the past, the way one writes is as important as what one writes.

The consequences of this failure to understand the art of history are profound. Many sectors of the public are have become averse to history on principle, frequently blaming a syllabus that left them with the impression that studying the past is a tedious and irrelevant exercise. Society has gradually lost interest in what historians have to say. It does not matter whether the historian in question is a cultural, political or social historian, or whether he/she

uses quantitative or qualitative techniques. By writing in a style that is routine, unadventurous and unoriginal, the historian tacitly suggests that what he or she has to say is also routine, unadventurous and unoriginal. History has slipped from its position at the very heart of our culture to a relatively quiet backwater. Regardless of the real and exciting innovations in certain fields of historical research, the public sees historians as saying the same old sorts of things in the same old way – with just the occasional discovery of a new ‘fact’ or object worthy of the attention of the national press.

The peculiar thing is that historians themselves seem not to have noticed this slippage. Indeed, many vehemently deny that it is the case. In the British press, when accusations are raised at the loss of status for history, professional historians point out that academic courses are more heavily subscribed than ever, that history is more often on TV than ever, and that bookstores are packed with history books. Maybe. But context is everything. We have dozens of cheap TV shows now, so it is not surprising that more low-budget, intellectually gentle history programmes are included. Bookstores maybe packed with history books but few make it on to the bestseller lists, few of those are by academic historians, and none make it on to the booksellers’ lists of ‘Favourite books of the decade/century’. Not long ago the Royal Historical Society had a debate in its newsletter in which the demise of the academic monologue was openly discussed. As for academic courses, in the 1980s history was the third most popular course at undergraduate level in the UK (after law and medicine). In 1998 it was still at no. 7. These days it is languishing around no. 17. It lags far behind management studies, business studies and computer science. Some traditional subjects like English, law and medicine are still in the top ten; but you will find many more people now studying sports science than history. The implication is that many bright minds who once opted for a historical education now choose a different subject. And history books no longer occupy the central place in culture that they did in the period 1945-1970. Society has started to take historians for granted – in precisely the way that it does *not* take computer science or economists for granted.

How has this happened? Every historian will have a different answer. My own is based on the demolition of the art of history, and it begins way back in 1903 with J. B. Bury's famous declaration that history 'is a science, no more and no less.' In the twentieth century the 'science' of history, or *knowing* the past, came to be seen as the key difference between the professional historian and the amateur writer. Many amateurs could write as well as professionals, it had to be admitted; but only the professionals could be relied upon to write accurately on a regular basis. Hence the professionals came to place a greater emphasis on history as a 'science'. G. M. Trevelyan was probably foremost among those who saw the danger implicit in such an attitude: he directly referred to the threat to the accessibility of history in his *History and the Reader* (1945). He argued that history has a dual nature: being a science with regard to the discovery of facts and an art in the exposition of those facts to the public. But his views were very quickly outdated by questions of objectivity and the epistemological doubts about what constituted a 'fact'. How far historians could prove aspects of the past became a desperately urgent debate. The art of history by comparison was never subject to a programme of enhancement that even remotely compared to the 'science' – it always lacked that urgency. In fact, the 'art' (such as it was) came to be seen as one of the weaknesses of the 'science'. Hayden White illustrated this in 1966:

Everywhere there is resentment over what appears to be the historian's bad faith in claiming the privileges of both the artist and the scientist while refusing to submit to critical standards currently obtaining in either art or science' ('The Burden of History', *History and Theory*, vol. 6, p. 112).

What had previously been viewed as a success by the likes of Trevelyan – a careful balancing act between the 'art' and the 'science' of determining and describing the past – now was portrayed as a failure. In fact it became a double failure: the failure to determine the past with certainty on the one hand and the failure to create a meaningful form of discourse for the general public on the other.

As we all are well aware, Hayden White's work and the later criticisms of postmodernists raised profound philosophical doubts about the epistemological value of historians' work. While some historians called it a crisis, others ignored the postmodern challenge altogether. Neither response was good: intellectuals outside the profession became genuinely excited by the attack on the authority of 'the historian' which few members of the profession seemed eager to answer. Nevertheless, the innate desire of historians to be sure of their facts encouraged to sharpen their methodological acts. Academics started using a whole host of sophisticated methods to produce reliable data about the past – from quantitative analysis and computers to advanced source criticism and specific cultural-history techniques. Such developments coincided with a massive expansion of academic history at undergraduate level. The two forces conspired to promote academic history to new heights of rigour and responsibility, even if the value of the discipline had been called into question philosophically. Serious history became synonymous with academic history: professional, technical, sophisticated, and methodologically more robust.

The problem was that 'knowing the past' was only half the problem – the scientific side of Hayden White's art-science conflict. It amounted to the discipline of history, which was (and is) restricted by the necessary rigour of higher education. History as a whole was systematically stripped of its artistic elements in order to produce a self-critical, reflexive discipline of substantial intellectual rigour and widespread value as an educational tool.

This distinction between the discipline and the art of history is important and needs emphasis as it is a subject of considerable confusion. University-based historians *might* look beyond the academic horizon to practise the art of history but the vast majority never do. Academics are not artists. If they were, they would be found living in garrets, risking poverty, surviving on a diet of historical inspiration as they struggle to pursue true understandings of humanity in the past, disdaining all contact with students, like would-be composers and painters. If academics were artists they would not undertake administrative duties. They would only turn

up to lectures when it suited them to do so – and they would revolt against having to limit or extend their performances to one-hour slots. Rather, academic historians are purveyors of a taut, refined form of history which is tailored to the needs of a large body of undergraduates and the demands of those who will eventually employ them (including the universities themselves). Academic arguments need to be well-evidenced and well-argued, so certain areas of history are neglected in favour of others where evidence is plentiful and argument can be tested. This of course reduces academic history to a series of narrow areas of enquiry. These narrow areas are heavily populated and thus rendered increasingly complicated as more and more sophisticated arguments are used to gain precedence or significance. Speculation is anathematised due to its weakness as a form of argument. Erring on the side of caution is encouraged – even though it is demonstrably the result of the author's own defensive predisposition, and still 'erring'.

It goes without saying that the discipline of history, as taught in universities, has huge value. Education to PhD level (and preferably beyond) is essential if we want to address a large audience confidently in a meaningful way. It is a *sine qua non* if a writer wishes to understand the limitations of sources and the methodological problems of advancing any historical argument. But a doctorate is just the starting point for those who want to practise history as an art. Having come to terms with the limitations of academic history we must then learn to transcend them if we wish to connect in a meaningful way with a wider readership. We must invent our own explanations of the past in order to convey them with conviction and energy to the public. We must be prepared to take risks which are not academically safe, to break the barriers of academia. It should go without saying that we do not break such barriers idly or without reason but in order to give a rounded, full explanation of some aspect of the human past. To communicate directly and meaningfully with the public, we cannot restrict ourselves to the discipline of history: it simply lacks soul.

There would therefore seem to be a tension between the discipline of history – as practised in universities – and what is possible artistically. Historians who seek popularity for its own sake tend to resolve this tension by prioritising their set-piece writing over the discipline, extending the limits of the evidence beyond breaking point. I hardly need to say in this journal that this is wrong. It does not strengthen the art of history, it weakens it. The way to produce great historical art does not lie in subordinating the discipline – that would be like Michelangelo forgetting his colours when painting the Sistine Chapel. Rather, the way to produce significant historical work depends on acknowledging that the discipline is one of the most important constituent elements in what constitutes the art. Another important element is good writing. But contrary to most assumptions, ‘good writing’ is not just clarity of expression. It is also creative thought, imagination – some of the skills of the storyteller. Depending on the story being told, it may include drama, pathos, and suspense. It may include subtle literary techniques, such as the objective correlative and deliberate ambiguity. Similarly it requires vision – by which I mean the ability to recognise something meaningful in an aspect of the human past that no one has ever seen before. It requires the courage and confidence to pursue that vision even if it lies far beyond the academic horizon, even in the face of academic stigmatisation. It requires originality of thought and expression (the sincerity of the writer’s belief being fundamental to both). It thus depends on lived experience and an understanding of others’ lived experiences.

These elements are not easily acquired. A mastery of the discipline – a PhD degree, for example – is the easy part. Looking beyond the academic horizon is something that relatively few historians do: finding something meaningful for contemporaries in the mists of time is not easy or predictable. One of the greatest impediments of course, is money – but that is where the analogy with the struggling artist in a garret comes in. The determined artist will do it, no matter what the obstacles. The really hard parts are the other elements. Frankly, if you don’t have the ability to write fluently, then brilliant analytical skills will not by themselves find you a non-

specialist publisher, let alone a conduit to the shelves of high street book stores or tens of thousands of engaged readers. Similarly if you lack experience and imagination you will find it hard to communicate meaningfully with the proverbial man in the street. And if you lack courage, you will not tackle the biggest themes and the most important issues, nor the most contentious subjects.

The art of history is therefore not the antithesis of the discipline or academic study of history. It is something much more than both the discipline and the ability to write well combined. It is more than the sum of its parts. It does not matter what facts you have at your disposal, or how many of them are true, proven, questionable, probable, possible or doubtful. The determination and questioning of facts by itself is only one element – just as a well-designed car is only one element of motor racing. We choose our evidence, we explore it, we determine reliable parameters, and we fill in the gaps. We argue and we explain. Sometimes we judge. We draw from our own experiences and we find comparisons with other models of human behaviour. And if in all that we can create juxtapositions and correlations that have meaning, we start to build something new and significant for society. Soon a form of poetry emerges in the history: it starts to build in the reader without anyone noticing, as he or she starts to understand a world or an individual which is beyond their own experience and expectations. Anything could happen. At any time the narrative could reveal a shift of character, or something could disturb a careful plot, or the reader could realise that the path on which a key historical character is set is one of destruction. That form of historical artistry – the poetry of the truth unfolding, even though it has already happened – is not possible within the discipline of history. We have to go beyond the limits of academia in order to practise it.

It is in this context that I want to refer readers back to Stephen Pyne's contribution to the January 2010 edition of this journal, 'Riding the Melt'. Professor Pyne argues that the teaching of historical writing has been neglected – and he can hardly be wrong on that score. His

thesis in part foreshadows mine. In his words: 'While history is scholarship, it is also literature, and it is art. The best history will use literary craft consciously, and it will allow art to do heavy work rather than simply decorate or doodle.' I agree. But in the subsequent passages, where Professor Pyne lays out how he teaches the writing of history, I find no distinction between writing for the purposes of the discipline and writing for those of the art. Writing brilliantly within the academic framework is wholly different to writing well for the non-specialist and sometimes merciless public. This shortcoming does not seem to have been picked up on by those answering Professor Pyne's article. The response by John Demos in the same edition began with the words 'My first reaction on reading Stephen Pyne's essay was "hooray!" and so was my second. And my third.' This too was a reaction from within academic circles. I do not want to criticise those who are so earnestly pushing forward the enhancement of historical writing – far from it, I wish to applaud them – but an academic institution is a poor testing ground for any artist. English lecturers rarely make good poets. Painting teachers rarely paint masterpieces worthy of a national gallery. Teachers in drama schools and film schools do not win Oscars. Concert pianists do not depend on an institutional aegis. Like artists in these media, the historian must go beyond the educational horizon if he or she wishes to pursue and reach the summit of the art.

For these reasons, while many people talk about historians losing their confidence as a result of postmodernism and critical theory, it seems to me that the real challenge of the 1980s and 1990s was not to the discipline but to the art of history. In answering the accusation that their authority was artificial and that no amount of epistemological effort could meaningfully bridge the gulf between the past and the present, historians concentrated so intently on the discipline that they almost entirely neglected the art. The problem now is how to reverse this, and to bring the art of history back into focus, so that history itself may shift back to the cultural centre of society. The answer surely lies in the need for some good books to be published and

promoted: one can point to some shining examples on both sides of the Atlantic, some by academics and some by independent writers. But they are few and far between, and their scarcity draws attention to a second problem. Institutional historians at present have no incentive to promote or support the art of history. Indeed, some academics see a need to criticise those who would practise the art, declaiming that anything that goes beyond the academic horizon, and is questionable within the discipline of history, must be attacked – in order to defend the ‘scientific’ authority of history. This trend inhibits the ambitions of those who would otherwise write meaningfully and artfully about the past. So, the question we face is not just how to reintroduce the art of history but how we are to do so without losing the respect of our peers.

I can only answer this question from my own experience, and that is of course somewhat limited. But an obvious point to make at the outset is that it is advantageous to maintain an academic research profile as well as a popular writing one. Equally obviously, if your vision extends to a particularly contentious argument, it helps if you place it first in a peer-refereed journal. In this way you may develop reliability alongside art – content and form in unison – and use the two to attract the reader’s interest (including the interest of scholarly peers). For example, my biography of Edward III of England (1312-1377), *The Perfect King*, is 200,000 words long, has 1,209 endnotes and eight appendices, drawing from about three hundred manuscript sources and at least as many secondary works. A key element – the fake death of his father in 1327 – was published before the book in *The English Historical Review*. The biography is thus considerably longer and more heavily referenced than any other book available on Edward III at the present time. Despite this, it has turned out to be a modest commercial success (about 23,000 copies have sold in the UK since 2006; it is currently selling about 4,500 copies per year). What distinguishes it from an academic monograph of a similar length is that it is written with the reader in mind. The battles are written in a dramatic way. Edward’s political struggles are described so as to invite the reader’s desire for him to succeed. When his wife dies towards the

end of the book, the reader is invited to reflect on what they had shared together since those first days of adversity: the reader's response is likely to be an emotional one. This is not because of any invention but simply imaginative techniques – the conscious use of the objective correlative, timing, reminiscence, referral to the likelihood of the reader having experienced love and loss, or at least being able to understand such emotions. Above all else it is a text built on the philosophy that, in order to understand the subject, the historian has to try to sympathise with him – to understand *why* he did what he did – not simply to judge him. And because the reader also wants to sympathise with the subject, there is a natural tendency to immerse himself or herself in the unfolding narrative. No neutral or pseudo-objective academic history of the man's life could engage the reader with such a distant figure in quite the same way.

If we can engage readers' attention and understanding by deliberately encouraging them to sympathise with a character, and, if through this same process of deliberate sympathy, we can begin as historians to understand things about an individual character which were previously unexplained, can we apply the same exercise to social history? Can we sympathise with an entire culture? And can we encourage the public also to invest their time in trying to understand that culture? This was the conceptual question underpinning a book first published in the UK in 2008 and in the USA at the very end of 2009, entitled *The Time Traveler's Guide to Medieval England*. The central conceit is that medieval England can be treated as a tourist destination, and the reader is the tourist in question. The whole book is written in the present tense, like a normal guidebook. In effect it is simply a sympathetic biography of another century: it seeks to understand the past on its own terms, including its extremes, and it encourages the reader to sympathise with those who were alive in the fourteenth century. It demands answers to questions that most historians have not thought of, or do not bother with – for instance, what do you use for toilet paper? How do you clean your hair and teeth? What were the consequences of half the population being under the age of twenty-one? Why did men's clothing and footwear change so radically? In this

way it not only places the reader at the heart of the enquiry, it raises new questions about the people and the limitations of the extant evidence, and prompts the reader to join the historian in a mutual re-examination of that past century.

Such exercises can be dismissed as novelties by those who wish to do so. But any significant attempt to create a historical work of art is likely to be imbued with originality and thus to raise philosophical and methodological questions that go beyond the mere delivery of information. The introduction to *The Time Traveler's Guide*, for example, showed very clearly how human understanding of what it is to be alive is at the very core of all historical understanding. As I put it in the introduction:

The very best evidence for what it was like to be alive in the fourteenth century is an awareness of what it is like to be alive in any age, and that includes today. Our sole context for understanding all the historical data we might ever gather is our own life experience. We might eat differently, be taller, and live longer, and we might look at jousting as being unspeakably dangerous and not at all a sport, but we know what grief is, and what love, fear, pain, ambition, enmity and hunger are. We should always remember that what we have in common with the past is just as important, real and as essential to our lives as those things which make us different... W. H. Auden once suggested that to understand your own country you need to have lived in at least two others. One can say something similar for periods of time: to understand your own century you need to have come to terms with at least two others. The key to learning something about the past might be a ruin or an archive but the means whereby we may understand it is – and always will be – ourselves.

Such thoughts might be relatively unexciting to the subscriber to *History and Theory* but it needs to be remembered that they lie at the core of a book that has been enjoyed by more than a hundred thousand readers. The philosophy of history that underpins this passage (and the book as a whole) directly engages with the ways in which readers appreciate history. Their own life

experiences prompt questions and interpretations about the past. The modern reader of *The Time Traveler's Guide* will find some things that are wholly in accord with modern life. Other things will be so different that they are shocking – the habitual beating of children, for example. The book reveals that there is a form of historical correlative at work, in which the reader automatically juxtaposes historical facts with his/her own time and experience. Indeed, the simple historical correlative effect of realising just how different life was in a past century might be enough to fascinate readers, and to cause them to re-evaluate their own existence in relation to the present in much the same way their engagement with the past forces them to re-evaluate that age.

I explored this historical correlative effect in a subsequent book *1415: Henry V's Year of Glory*. This book is not so much a microbiography as a day-by-day account of every detail I could find concerning the king for the year, arranged according to the calendar. There is little or no selection of evidence – everything is included. Moreover, everything is laid out under the day on which it is known to have happened (as far as possible). But of course, as every reader will be aware, this is a very strange thing to do in a history book. The result is that the unadorned plain style shocks readers with its bald description of the 'facts'. Readers coming across Henry's ordinances concerning women in his army (that they should have their left arms broken) or his treatment of the prisoners of war at Agincourt (he massacred them in cold blood) will automatically juxtapose such behaviour against the norms of modern experience. Even the slightest details – the cost of a chicken, the time it took to travel a long distance – are bound to result in a reaction in the reader. The important point to realise is that there is no way that the writer can control this historical correlative effect because it depends on the reader's own experiences, not what is written by the historian. But it can be anticipated. The historian-as-artist can, through awareness of the power of the historical correlative, start to use the effect to build a sense of revulsion or empathy within the reader, which amounts to much more than the actual written words on the page, and is vivid in its recreation of a past culture.

It is in relating the past to the life experiences of the reader that the most important differences between history as an art and academic history lie. Stephen Pyne's essay begins with the words: 'History is a book culture'. I disagree. Understanding the past is rooted in lived experience: that of the subject, that of the historian and that of the historical subject(s) in question. It can be a spoken culture, a musical culture, a visual culture, even a spiritual one. When I look at the graves of my long-dead ancestors in churchyards, my understanding of them and their lives has nothing to do with books. The same applies where I stand on the shore and feel the cold sea fret and hear the wind, mindful of the maritime expeditions they undertook in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. From my office window I can see across the road to two listed buildings, each between two and four hundred years old. I am sitting on a chair that was given to an ancestor of mine by the bishop of Exeter in about 1860 while typing at a table that was made for a country-house library in about 1815. Appreciating the objects around us is not merely an aesthetic act, it is also a historical one. We live in a historical world. Our culture itself is inextricably linked with history. I understand how different it was to live in those houses across the road in 1800 – through the mental image of the servants living in the attics, the need to warm beds with bedpans in winter, the cream troughs in the dairy, the horses steaming in the stables. If I give a historical talk, I try to trigger feelings in readers that could not necessarily be contained within a book. I try to use the historical correlative to contrast life in the past and today. I want my audience to understand how different they are from their forebears, and yet how similar they are to them too. If I were to deliver such a talk on site – for example, in Westminster Abbey, where Edward III lies in the tomb next to that of his dear wife – then the history becomes more powerful in a wholly different way, through the sanctity of it being the very place where their bodies lie.

In conclusion, those who would understand how history can be made meaningful to society, and who see the writing of history as an important instrument in this process, need to

understand that there is a distinction to be made between the art and the discipline of history. Employed within an institution, we are hugely compromised with regard to literary expression, philosophical outlook, imagination, inspiration and originality. As a result, the practitioner of history as an art has a difficult task in the modern world in avoiding the censure of those who see history as 'a science, nothing more or less'. Indeed, there are probably a thousand historians specialising in the discipline of history for every exponent of the art. While the bounds of the art are limitless, incorporating everything that mankind has ever done, thought and said, the artist ignores the discipline at his peril. However, if we master the discipline of history and understand the constraints of academia, we can begin to look beyond those constraints and find ways of relating the experiences of those who lived in past centuries to those alive today. We can then start to use a number of literary techniques to encourage literary appreciation – suspense, attention to character detail, the objective correlative, geographical description and drama. And we can use a whole range of imaginative forms, or try a range of historical-literary experiments – from writing in the present tense to deliberate sympathetic biography, day-by-day history and even the literary techniques of fiction. We can dig deep in to the experiences of our own lives in order to ask new questions about past times and the decisions that past individuals have made. For the same fundamental questions about life, existence, ambition, love, power, desire, companionship and suffering that move all great art are also to be found in history – they are questions that we as historians can answer in our own ways as much as painters and poets can answer them in theirs. Answering these fundamental questions is not a matter for a university syllabus but it is perhaps the highest ambition of anyone who seek to understand humanity across the borders of time, and not just in the mirror of the present moment.

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