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# HISTORIOGRAPHY



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## Engaging History: Historians, Story-telling, and Self

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Carl Berger's major works, *The Sense of Power* (1970) and *The Writing of Canadian History* (1976), resemble Hegel's Owl of Minerva, for they took flight at the apogee of their subjects' influence. We come to understand only after the fact. *The Sense of Power* told the story of competing visions of English-Canadian nationalism – 'visions of grandeur,' as Berger had called his doctoral dissertation. But before the last reviews of the book were in, the meta-narratives on which such notions of nationalism in Canada were based had come into disarray; 'limited identities' became the mantra of Canadian historians in the 1970s, refracted through lenses – especially of class, race, and gender – that looked in other directions for meaning. In *The Writing of Canadian History*, imperial-nationalists and liberal autonomists struggled for attention and influence once again, this time within the historical profession in the form of Canadian historians such as Donald Creighton and Frank Underhill, W.L. Morton, and Arthur Lower – men whose views gained the attention of the national press and whose books were read by thousands of Canadians. Within a decade, the Canadian historian's reading public, like the story of Canada, had disappeared into the dark winter night.

The new chapter Berger added to the second edition of *The Writing of Canadian History* reflected the irony of the Canadian historian's own story in the years between 1976 and 1986. As much bibliographical essay as analytical narrative, 'Tradition and the "New" History' charted the expansion of the discipline, its practitioners, and their works, and told of new theories, new methods, and new directions, while also noting what Berger might well have called the historian's abandonment of public duty. 'The expectation of the reading public regarding a work of history and the practice of most academic historians,' Berger wrote

with characteristic restraint, 'were closer a generation ago than in the last decade.' Individual human beings had been displaced from the centre of the historian's attention, their place taken by 'anonymous social patterns ... groups and classes.' The abandonment of story-telling for question answering, Berger warned, 'tended to make access to the past difficult for the general reader; it was almost as though the historian had interposed himself or herself between the reader and history.' The work of even the best young historians had become incomprehensible to all but a few readers.<sup>1</sup>

Berger's final words on Canadian historical writing warned that this new history, its own path an ever-narrowing gyre, would eventually 'experience the same fate as the old history,' for in time its limitations, too, would become abundantly evident.<sup>2</sup> That time has surely come. Carl Berger's own body of work reflects story and understanding in equal measure. This contribution in his honour is offered in the hope that such a balance, so essential to the historian's craft, may once again find a place at the centre of the discipline in Canada.

In 1893, when G.M. Trevelyan was in his first year at Cambridge, Sir John Seeley, Regius Professor of History, infuriated the young man by declaring that Carlyle and Macaulay had been charlatans; infuriated him in part because it called into question his family's disposition towards narrative history. After all, Thomas Babington Macaulay, the most popular English historian of the nineteenth century, had been Trevelyan's great-uncle. His father, George Otto Trevelyan, was the distinguished author of a history of the American Revolution and biographer of Charles James Fox. Later, G.M. would himself become one of the great narrative historians of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

In this encounter more than a century ago, a young historian faced the accusation that if he followed his instincts he would become a mere story-teller, even if he did frequent the archives. Not many years later, Trevelyan would have a similar experience, this time in the figure of J.B. Bury, another Regius Professor of History. In his Inaugural Address, Bury declared, baldly, that although history 'may supply material for literary art or philosophical speculation, she is herself simply a science, no less and no more.'<sup>4</sup>

Readers of Bury's well-known manifesto or of Trevelyan's impassioned response to it, invoking Clio as muse rather than as scientist, soon discover that however deeply divided they appeared to be over whether history was a 'science' or an 'art,' the two historians shared

certain basic assumptions about the historian's craft. The first was that history *was* a craft. Bury, champion of history as 'science,' insisted that it must be written well, and clearly; Trevelyan, defender of history as art, insisted that history should be systematic and embedded in research.<sup>5</sup> Both emphasized that the best history should encompass a broad understanding of the many pathways to the past, and of the regions ripe for historical investigation.

The Bury-Trevelyan debate remains relevant to students of history because its angles of vision symbolize different directions taken in the study and writing of history during the twentieth century. Trevelyan drew attention to the importance of maintaining a sense of story – a recognition of the interplay of character and circumstance, and of the significance of the unique event. Bury pointed towards the study of historical experience as structure, system, and process – social, intellectual, or material. The great question these two historians raised – history, art or science? – continues to serve well as a heuristic device, for this Edwardian debate captured tensions that would reverberate within the profession throughout the twentieth century. Its ideological equivalent was the conflict between liberalism and Marxism. And both are linked as aspects of the age-old dialectic of the spiritual and the material, of inquiry and affirmation, and of value and fact, in history and in life.

Recent years have witnessed a revival and re-emergence of historical narrative. The historian as story-teller is once again in the archives, due in part to the movement of 'culture' to the centre of academic attention. But the whole point of invoking Bury and Trevelyan has been to point out that the uneasy relationship between the analytical and narrative functions of history is scarcely a new one. It is as old, if not older, than the advent of professional history itself; and it, too, has a history.

Tides are pulled by unseen forces. Western social theory, as it applies to the discipline of history, came during the twentieth century in three overlapping waves. The first was the nineteenth-century tsunami of political, constitutional, and diplomatic history that swept into the twentieth, dominating historical practice for several generations. The second was a movement of protest against the dominance of the political, towards the social, especially in France, Britain, and the United States. Then, late in the twentieth century, came the third wave: a general redirection of scholarship towards the realm of culture.<sup>6</sup>

The political approach to history was clearly in decline by the 1960s. Commitment to the social was in the ascendant, propelled in the acad-

emy by the expansion of scholarly historical attention beyond the boundaries of empire and nation, towards the authority of the social sciences. Breaking the bonds of parochialism, historians in effect rediscovered the earlier mission of J.B. Bury in England, James Harvey Robinson and Charles A. Beard in the United States, and Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre in France – advocates of the ‘New History’ of the interwar years, ideologically progressive and pluralistic in method.<sup>7</sup> The trajectory of the left-leaning ‘New History’ of the 1960s and 1970s, dedicated initially to matters of class, social structure, and equality, but increasingly to feminist and gender issues, dominated mainstream historiography for the better part of a quarter century. This rich and illuminating social history is with us still. But on its own mission to expand the dimensions of history beyond those of the political and the social, the third wave of historiography took shape, inspired by cultural critics such as Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and others in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>8</sup> The turn to culture gained substantial force in the 1980s, largely out of frustration over the limitations of social forms of historical explanation and recognition that meaning in history takes place in the arena of cultural experience.

All of this had a salutary effect on the profession by broadening it. In hindsight, however, we can perhaps now also say that social history at times brought with it more than a whiff of arrogance. The approach privileged human beings in the aggregate. Only human beings conceived and marshalled as part of a larger collectivity, it was often said, could generate historical meaning, and only through statistical inference. In contrast, work that focused on a single individual, even an influential individual, was seen to lack historical significance. For quantitative social historians during the heyday of ‘Cliometrics,’ the life of an individual spoke only to discrete action and to tangential influence.<sup>9</sup> Studying the life of a mere individual lacked the power of prediction, for it pointed towards the idiosyncrasy of the contingent. It was seen to privilege the heroic in history; and to substitute mere narration for analysis, and description for understanding. This, went the inference of such hubris, was not really history – certainly not good history. Individuals precluded generalization. Narration precluded analysis. And who needed any more of *that*?

A third of a century later, the tide again turned, this time redirecting currents of change not from the political to the social but from the social to the cultural. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the reconstitution of Central and Eastern Europe; the effort by E.P. Thompson, Raymond

Williams, and others to develop and articulate a theory of culture within a materialist framework; the resistance of ordinary people to the hegemonic influence of corporate powerbrokers bent on global influence and the obliteration of any lingering remnant of indigenous custom; the postmodern rejection of universal 'truth' and meta-narrative of any sort – all of this resulted in the burgeoning of cultural studies with all the transdisciplinary orientations and influences the movement carried with it.<sup>10</sup>

'Think globally. Act locally,' goes a catchphrase of the environmental movement. 'The personal is the political,' says one generated by the women's movement. Each phrase tells us in its own way that agency, the capacity of people to think and act for themselves, is not divorced from the local environment or from the discrete individual. The capacity for change, they say, is not the preserve of global forces or the public order alone; *individuals count* in the struggle to act as citizens in a consumer society.<sup>11</sup>

The scholarly movement during the 1980s towards the 'new cultural history' reflected something similar, but with respect to historical understanding and explanation. Historians increasingly preoccupied with only the most recent scholarship (equating it with the best scholarship) rediscovered what Trevelyan knew, as had Huizinga, Burkhardt, Carlyle, Macaulay, Gibbon, and other now neglected historians before them: that history as process involves structures that are social, political, and intellectual; but that history as lived and (literally) 'embodied' involves individual beings – people of flesh and blood, ideas, and excrement. History on the ground exudes *The Foul and the Fragrant*, to recall the title of Alain Corbin's marvellous book, subtitled *Odor and the French Social Imagination*.<sup>12</sup>

Historical biography, all but abandoned by academic historians during the 1960s as a career-damaging enterprise of the sort experienced when English professors dare to *write* literature as well as comment upon it,<sup>13</sup> is now in strong public demand. As often as not, however, this demand has come to be met by literary scholars and journalists rather than by historians. No longer content with human subjects, the journalist-as-biographer has turned to the life story of the material object. In an over-determined world, the idea that at least the non-human subject forges its own history and creates meaning is something the public wants to believe, and journalists, who know the market, write for it. So biographies have appeared of the compass, the screwdriver, the pencil, the mirror, coffee, sugar, chocolate, and the colour mauve.

The stripe has found its flag bearer. The penis has found its Boswell. The author of a book on this latter subject gave his magnum opus the title *A Mind of Its Own*.<sup>14</sup> What else could it be? The subject is of interest, but this author regrets to say that he has not been up to reading it.

Biographers of objects of material culture such as these argue that the life story of an object helps us understand the past, just like the study of people or institutions. Martin Andrews of the Center for Ephemera Studies at the University of Reading, declares: 'If you want to get something of the atmosphere and the mood of the time, it's through the everyday trivia rather than the pompous reflections of historians looking back on government edicts.'<sup>15</sup> One need not go as far as this, denigrating the capacity of mere human lives to illuminate the past, in order to recognize that biographers of objects share with biographers of people a commitment to the concrete and the particular, and to narrating the 'story' of their subjects' 'lives.'

Yet the popularity and concern for the life history of the object speaks to more than the object and its story. It speaks also to a popular desire to count for something and to a generalized fear that in a global culture we do not. So writers, including historians, hedge their bets. Because we have difficulty authenticating a sense of meaning and agency in ourselves, we seek to locate it in the things we create, and tell ourselves we control – objects, and the group as object, embedded in specific, concrete, and local circumstance. Viewed in this context, the life history of the object, one strand of the 'return to narrative,' speaks to something greater than the question of whether or not historians are doing their work properly. It speaks also to a renewed hunger for human significance. And the contemporary reader wants to locate that significance not in the nature of 'society,' or the timelessness of the *'longue durée,'* but in the life of the individual in community, because that is what the reader is, and where she lives. It speaks volumes for our age that we historians find it necessary to experience agency vicariously, by attaching it less to the inner resources we possess than to the material commodities we create.

You will, of course, already have noticed a tension, if not an outright contradiction, between my language and my argument. A moment ago I pointed to the location of cultural meaning in the individual and the local – in 'specific, concrete, and local circumstance.' But my language remained abstract and detached. I did not intend to write in a way that ran counter to my argument. It just happened in the act of writing. It

happened because, over what is now almost a full academic career, I have become expert in deploying the objective case and therefore in suppressing the personal pronoun. In the socialization that comes with becoming a professional academic, I learned to privilege the universal and to disregard the parochial, and with this to prefer the abstract to the concrete – in words as well as in ideas. And so, over the years, I acquired and learned to deploy a language of detachment; one that is intended to demonstrate my ‘objectivity.’ This has been, and remains, the loyalty oath of the scholar.

Detachment in itself is a virtue. Most scholars attempt to view evidence from several perspectives, including those not their own. The problem with intellectual detachment is that it too easily leads to emotional – more accurately, affective – disengagement. In the case of academic writing, this sometimes leads to a more general disengagement from the very subjects we study, at least in the arts. It is to this problem I wish now to turn by way of personal illustration.

I stumbled into writing popular history quite by accident a few years ago. I had come across a curious footnote to Canadian legal history and decided to write a tight little monograph on the subject – one that would be objective and judicious. But during the process of marshalling the material and writing, something completely unexpected happened. More by instinct than by discovery, I became aware that my intellect had constructed only the shell within which the story resonated. The shell gave shape and structure to the plot, but it proved to be the emotional dynamics of the story that made possible a meaningful connection between story and reader.

In the act of writing *The Spinster and the Prophet*, I found myself especially sensitive to the human drama that lay *behind* the issue of whether or not H.G. Wells plagiarized an unknown Toronto woman well advanced in age. For some reason, and in an almost impalpable way, I found myself emotionally connected to the loss, the betrayal, and the fear Florence Deeks must have experienced in her solitary struggle with the legal system. Only after the book was published did I come to recognize that while training as a historian had helped me organize the plot of my story, it was having a mother who died a lingering death from lung cancer as I drafted the book that had allowed me to abandon the habit I had worked so hard to acquire – that of standing apart from, and above, my subject. I wrote my book, I now understand, less as a practised historian or as a neophyte biographer, than as a grieving son. Only when readers began to describe to me how it had affected

them, did I fully understand that a well-constructed assessment of the question of literary theft might *convince* a reader, but that a well-crafted evocation of the emotional elements of the story, would *touch* a reader.

Something similar occurred a few years later when tackling a biography of celebrity journalist and popular historian Pierre Berton. The figure of Berton's father, Frank – usually viewed as an influence on Pierre secondary to his mother, Laura – rather unexpectedly became the second most important character in the book. Frank had triumphed over adverse childhood circumstances in New Brunswick and reached the Klondike in '98; but he failed to strike gold and spent the remainder of his life a government clerk, devoted to his family but carrying with him the whiff of personal failure. To an extent this conclusion, not shared by Pierre's younger sister, came about through my discovery that after the death of her husband in the 1870s, a poverty-stricken Lucy Fox Berton had placed her six-year-old son Frank in a Saint John orphanage. He lived there until he left the Wiggins Male Orphan Institution at sixteen, and kept the experience a dark secret for the rest of his life.<sup>16</sup>

Only when the manuscript was finished did it occur to me that the emergence of Frank Berton as the enigmatic object of a son's quest to understand his father had gained resonance for me because my own father's inner life had in some ways paralleled that of Frank – child of a Depression, an orphan as a boy, ambition stilled by circumstance, dedicated to family, imbued for life with a sense of failure and of life's injustices. I wrote *Pierre Berton: A Biography* in a scarcely registered state of worry at the declining health of a father as enigmatic in his own way as Frank Berton, a man whose favourite words were 'god damn,' living alone in his late eighties and half a continent away. While drafting and redrafting a scene in which Frank Berton bids farewell to his distraught fifteen-year-old son Pierre in mid-Depression Victoria in order to return to the Klondike (and a job) for the last time, I had wondered why, with each revision, the moment moved me to tears; wondered, that is, until I recalled those wretched Winnipeg winters of memory in the 1950s when my father, then a construction worker, would leave home to find work in Saskatchewan or Alberta. The biography done and submitted, the letter I sent to my eighty-six-year-old father letting him know that I had dedicated the book to him, arrived in Winnipeg on the morning he died. Too late, yet once again personal loss, like the chemical mix of a synaptic gap, had linked itself to story in a way that no amount of academic training could have brought about. It is not the sense of loss that is important here; rather, it is the discovery of ways of tapping into

inner resources, thereby enriching the cognitive through the affective, in the act of re-creation.

One of the abiding characteristics of entrance into the historical profession is that so much that is necessary for the acquisition of skill is left to the student's own devices. This includes being schooled in the craft of writing. We professors correct the grammar and the dangling participles of undergraduate essays, and we often find ourselves informing students in our comments that they must improve their 'style,' by which we often mean their syntax and sentence construction. But how many of us pay serious attention as teachers to style in the larger sense, as the rhetoric or poetics of history? Love them or lament them, those before us did this. Jack Hexter, Jacques Barzun, Peter Gay, Barbara Tuchman, John Clive, and the sociologist C. Wright Mills – each took pains to draw attention to the rhetorical skills required to sustain a narrative, and therefore to gain and keep the reader's attention.<sup>17</sup> So, in Canada, did Donald Creighton and W.L. Morton.

In his essay 'The Art of Narrative,' Morton wrote a half-century ago that History is 'inquiry, a research, methodically carried out; it is an account of the findings of the inquiry, narrated in such manner as to give pleasure by informing.' History as science, as method, said Morton, had progressed; history as art, as style, had not. 'We will all agree,' he said, 'that it is this almost rude insistence on the primacy of method, this consequent indifference to style, which is to say to any potential audience, that has lost for historical writers, even good ones, the audience [and] the market history had a century ago.'<sup>18</sup> This in 1959, a time many of us would view as the golden age of historical narrative in Canada.

Morton's reminder that history should 'give pleasure by informing,' and that indifference to style risks losing one's audience, was not far from mind as I prepared to write *The Spinster and the Prophet*. It continued to be, when I wrote about Pierre Berton's life. My research, in archives and in books ranging from the history of patriarchy and Edwardian literary circles to the history of the Klondike gold rush and Canadian publishing, proved relatively easy. I was trained to do this. The really difficult work came in building on what Morton and others had to say about the art of narrative.

How can a university-trained writer become freed of the constraints imposed by the academic monograph, once the thesis is done? Neither the Deeks' nor the Berton story lends itself to monographic form, and I know first-hand that Mr Berton had previously rejected offers from

others to write his biography precisely because he was fearful someone would publish a turgid thesis about him. To help break from the monographic straightjacket, I have found certain 'how to' books helpful. David Lodge's *The Practice of Writing*, Richard Rhodes's *How to Write*, and Jon Franklin's *Writing for Story* proved especially valuable for their shift of focus from the meaning of content to the manner of conveyance.<sup>19</sup> That bible of the Hollywood film industry, Syd Field's book, *Screenplay*, understandably draws attention to the importance of the visual in carrying a story; but it also draws attention to the need to be aware of 'plot points' in the overall dramatic arc of a story, for it is they that propel and convey dramatic tension, engagement, conflict, and resolution. The book I've found most useful book for understanding the different expectations of academic and trade editors is *Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Serious Nonfiction – and Get It Published*, by Alfred Fortunato and Susan Rabiner.<sup>20</sup> Academic readers of this insightful work will discover the differences between the dissertation proposal and the book pitch, and much more.

How many of our history teachers ever pointed to the dramatic 'arc' of a story about the past? For that matter, how many dared to consider 'history' as 'story,' even though the latter is literally embedded in the former? Certainly none of mine, not after Grade 8, although I wish they had. How many of us spend as much time struggling over matters of narrative pace as we do over footnote place? How much thought do we give to the precise point of climax, or the element of *dénouement*, in the books we write? How well do we develop the 'characters' in our historical accounts? (I wonder sometimes how a Canadian Arthur Miller would make alive – even to the stage – some of the poignant human stories in Joy Parr's *The Gender of Breadwinners*, a prize-winning book about men and women living and working in two southern Ontario textile towns.<sup>21</sup>) Why, for that matter, did I feel obliged to use the wooden phrase 'historical accounts' instead of the simple word 'stories' in what I just wrote?

Academic historians tend to view the past as a series of 'problems' to be 'solved,' and solved as quickly and efficiently as possible. But the general reader who turns to a work of history may well see the past as mystery, as stories that are strange and different. Most readers of mystery stories want the mystery to be 'solved,' but not on the first page by an anxious author. Many of the people who read history do so, I suspect, to encounter a different world, but welcome the shock of recognition when these strange lands or peoples ape or illuminate their own.

How seldom we think to say of our ideal reader what Mrs Willy Loman says of her dead husband, in *Death of a Salesman*: 'Attention must be paid.'<sup>22</sup> We must respect the reader as we respect the departed. To my mind, we too often do our readers a disservice, patronizing them and underestimating their intelligence, if we think of them at all. I am myself a champion of the dissertation abstract, for it is a scholarly apparatus of particular value, especially to harried examiners. But why do we so often structure the chapters of our later books, by – by what? *By stating our conclusions at the outset*. And then, fearing perhaps that the reader's memory is as faulty as our own, why do we further blunt the reader's imagination by summarizing our findings at the conclusion of each chapter, often in the least imaginative way possible? Only the university-trained scholar oblivious to the book's readers would do this.

Which one of our teachers, in some distant English or History course, taught us that telegraphed conclusions and 'seamless continuity' were virtues, making for a better book or a more satisfied reader? Was it Miss Thistlebottom – she who taught us to, above all, never split an infinitive? And never, no never, to deploy a sentence fragment?<sup>23</sup> I am with Harvard historian John Clive, who writes, in his book *Not by Fact Alone*, this: 'Nothing can induce tedium and indifference on the reader's part more rapidly than a historian's advance summary of his conclusions. One's natural reaction to such summaries may well be: "Why, then, should I bother to read this book, or thesis, or essay, when, after all, I know what the author is going to tell me?"' 'Is it merely poetic licence,' Clive asks, 'to claim that history stories are mystery stories? I think not. In one of his roles, the historian is, after all, the skilled detective who asks questions, locates and follows clues, and must not reveal the solution until the tale is told.'<sup>24</sup>

John Clive reminds us that even the most unlikely or staid historical topic or theme can maintain an aura of mystery until ultimately resolving it. Arthur Koestler does so in an imaginative and powerful way in his instructive book about fraud and scandal in the early-twentieth-century biological sciences, *The Case of the Midwife Toad*. So does Josephine Tey, in *The Daughter of Time*, a novel about the legend surrounding Richard III that every history student should read.<sup>25</sup> Conventional history can often be treated in a similar way. Elie Halévy, for one, did so in his lengthy masterpiece *England in 1815*. In it, he poses the mystery – Why did England have no Revolution like the French? – as a question, and at the outset of a very long book. But only after all other explanations, including political and economic ones, have been set for-

ward and discarded does Halévy 'solve' the puzzle. It turns out that the 'butler' named Methodism did it, in the name of Religion and Culture. And as in all good mysteries, the reader is the last to know.<sup>26</sup>

Was it Miss Thistlebottom, too, who insisted that we *must* deploy prophylactic segues, linking paragraph to paragraph, and section to section, in the cause of seamless continuity? Why have we so often accepted, as an article of faith, the assertion that smooth transition is always superior to radical disjunction – chronological, spatial, or thematic? The 'seamless web' of narrative prevents an abrupt shift in historical venue or theme in the reader's mind; it is, we are told, a mark of superior style. I beg to differ. No one wants to confuse the reader, but incessant continuity for continuity's sake is, to my mind, the WD-40 of literary technique.

Seamless narrative serves a good purpose, of course: as connective tissue. But as a primary guide to good prose style it also serves to blunt the reader's attention by giving her a false sense of historical continuity. As historians, we are usually aware of the discontinuities of the past; but when time comes to write, we fear that the reader might not follow the story unless we construct convenient prose bridges at every thematic or chronological turn in the river. This serves to flatten dramatic tension. It also distorts the past.

There is power in disjunction. An absence of continuity forces the reader to think for herself, to create in the mind's eye missing transitions, to discern difference, in this way forcing her to think about causation. Or, in the absence of causal links, to interrogate the forces leading to disjuncture and to create and deploy categories of difference. The lives of Miss Deeks and Mr Wells could not have been more unlike: fidelity to family and social isolation, on the one hand, serial adultery and social connection, on the other. When, in *The Spinster and the Prophet*, I alternated within each chapter the telling of her story and his, I worried a great deal that this disjunction would disturb or confuse the reader. These fears proved unwarranted. The very difference of circumstance and lack of connection of one protagonist with the other, the reasons for my worry, were what in fact drove the story forward. Its force and its dramatic tension came about precisely through the disjunction and discordance that had so concerned me.

In this way, historical narrative can take on interpretive power even as it pushes the reader's interest forward in time. For lessons in the ways disjunction and radical discontinuity can reinvigorate the im-

agination and reawaken readers' interest, by all means read historians who have mastered narrative, like Simon Schama and Barbara Tuchman; but we should not neglect or feel guilty about reading adventure writers like Wilbur Smith or thriller writers like Gerald Seymour. I would scarcely recommend Mr Smith as a model for the academic monograph, but he is a past master of narrative pace – and how many of our monographs possess that? Just how *is* it that Wilbur Smith can write a compelling page-turner of five or six hundred pages without *once* employing a chapter break?<sup>27</sup>

A major problem in the way we write that diminishes our readability, and hence our readership, is what I will call the Tyranny of the Academic Other. I am confident that most scholars have some notion of their desired reader in mind when they write, but I suspect that this figure too often resembles the embodiment of their dissertation examining committee. A ghostlike apparition hovers over the shoulder of most of us long after our thesis has been defended. Even *The Spinster and the Prophet*, seven books removed from the dissertation stage, required an exorcism, and I recommend one at the post-dissertation-partum stage of life. It occurred to me, as I began to write about Miss Deeks and Mr Wells, that thirty years into an academic career, almost every piece of sustained writing I had undertaken had been done for the Academic Other in one form or another: for a high school short story committee, for an M.A. committee, for a Ph.D. committee; for several Carleton Library Series editorial committees; for the Ontario Historical Series editorial committee; and for two committees of one, in the persons of W.L. Morton and S.F. Wise, whose essays I collected, edited, and introduced.

We secure good advice in writing for such committees, but we also pick up the same bad habits that came after Miss Thistlebottom's elder sister told us in art class, way back when, that the sky *had* to be blue, and *Sky Blue* at that. Certainly not green. A green sky, after all, brings with it the threat of a creative imagination. By such means, in this and in a thousand other ways right through grad school, we learned not to take chances or be adventurous; instead, we discovered clever ways to conform, to play it safe, to strive to impress, and thereby to curry favour. Did I mention the thesis examining committee?

Through lessons such as these we become scholars. But in the process we risk losing – and too often, I fear, we do lose – our sense of ourselves as authors. We become victims of latter-day Mr Gradgrinds, cousins to the Thistlebottoms, concerned solely with 'the facts' and distrustful of

the unfettered imagination – and we thereby diminish the capacity to connect and the range of affect that together connect us to others, and to ourselves.

Whatever else lay behind my decision to spend a half-dozen years on one woman's encounter with the arbiters of history, and then turn to popular biography, the most compelling personal reason has been the simple determination to be true, for once, to myself. I have long wanted to write at least one book for no one's purpose but my own – to satisfy my curiosity, to convey to others a sense of the chase of history and the exhilaration it involves. And to purge myself of the lurking presence of the Academic Other. I wanted to be free to invoke what now has almost been lost but what was once as common as it was essential in the writing of history: a vivid sense of place. Good history, as Barbara Tuchman has reminded us, is written by the ounce, through fidelity to the 'telling detail.' In the case of the Deeks book, I wanted my readers to feel the close atmosphere of interwar Toronto. I wanted to give the homes in which Miss Deeks and Mr Wells lived the same careful attention readers pay to their own homes, and to knit in words the lace curtains that masked genteel poverty; make visible the array of goods on the main floor of Eaton's College Street store on a blustery November day in 1920; to give meaning to the hearts carved in the front doors of Easton Glebe, Wells's country estate – hearts inverted to become spades, as if to serve as a permanent reminder to his wife Catherine (he called her Jane) that there would be no unnecessary romance in this home. Why should we not devote to such details the same meticulous attention we afford to complicated strands of cultural theory?

Above all, I wanted to write a book with characters from whose lives the book's dominant themes issued, strands of human experience played out inside their homes: strands of commitment and betrayal, accomplishment and frustration, community and isolation, love and indifference. And to do so in a way that engaged the reader at an emotional as well as an intellectual level, writing for the heartbeat.

Is there room in academic history for books that draw upon the sanctuary of affect as well as the kingdom of intellect? I hope so, and believe that attention to the craft of historical narrative can help bring this about. One view of 'style,' after all, is that it is the expression of one's authentic self. It is this, says Peter Gay, that makes style 'the art of the historian's science.'<sup>28</sup> We cultivate an enthusiasm of sorts in our students, but how well do we nurture in them a genuine and impassioned

engagement with the subjects they choose to study? My sense is that when we fail to foster this engagement in others, it is because we have often not yet engaged our selves.<sup>29</sup>

An intellectual education, when not balanced by resources of affect, can become a sustained exercise that alienates the self instead of liberating it. John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* demonstrates this.<sup>30</sup> Our 'noble dream' of objectivity<sup>31</sup> requires subordination of the passionate to the reasonable; in this way, we learn to strive to meet the expectations of others. How often it is that, intellects running at full bore, we find ourselves – or, more often, notice others – simply filling space within existing circles of interpretive concern, effectively tying ourselves to familiar thought patterns and conceptual frameworks, content with 'filling a gap' in one area or another. As knowledge workers, too often we do not create, we replicate; we do not increase, we extend. We enlarge the scholarly comfort zone and venture far too seldom into genuinely uncharted territory, including our own interiorities. In such ways we diminish our profession, and ourselves.

Someone once asked André Maurois why he had chosen to write a life of Shelley. He answered that the poet mirrored his early emotions; 'and it seemed to me indeed,' he added, 'that to tell the story of this life would be a way of liberating me from myself.'<sup>32</sup> Liberated, yes, but also enlarged and enriched and emboldened.

All true art, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Robert Olen Butler once said, is rooted in yearning.<sup>33</sup> I believe this. I believe further that is not only possible but also desirable within the arts to engage in the act of writing in ways that are intellectually rigorous yet that draw upon the emotive force of what Martha Nussbaum calls 'the uneven intermittence of attention and desire that inhabits our own imaginations.'<sup>34</sup> We need more often to reach within ourselves and liberate this force in the act of authorial creation. It will become embedded in the non-fiction works we write no less than it does in a great novel. This would not turn history into some cheap form of therapy. Instead, by drawing upon the power of our emotional and moral resources in ways we too seldom do (after all, we are historians), it would tap the wellsprings of our authentic self, unimpeded by the arrogances and defence mechanisms of intellect. In doing this, we would not debase our craft; rather, we would elevate it by forming a more authentic link between our sense of self and the subjects we study.

This may seem against the grain of what we think makes us professional. It seems to suggest that we must first feel what we study and

write about, and only then think about it, and that this works against the cultivation of a disciplined intelligence. Yet nothing I have said involves suspending either critical judgment or the ideals or apparatus of scholarship. The past quarter-century of scholarship in disciplines from philosophy and literature to anthropology and neuroscience has taught that not only do emotions and subjectivities count, and count for much, but that, when associated with cultural experience, they are instrumental in the formation of rationality itself. This is the message I take from Martha Nussbaum's *Upheavals of Thought*, Ronald de Sousa's *The Rationality of Emotions*, and Antonio Damasio's *Looking for Spinoza* (subtitled, *Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*).<sup>35</sup> 'Over time,' the neurologist Damasio writes, 'we do far more than merely respond automatically to components of a social situation with the repertoire of innate social emotions. Under the influence of social emotions (from sympathy and shame, to pride and indignation) and of those emotions that are induced by punishment and reward (variants of sorrow and joy), we gradually categorize the situation, we experience – the structure of the scenarios, their components, their significance in terms of our personal narrative.'<sup>36</sup> To a degree, then, we do indeed think what we feel.

Whatever the balance between the affective and the cognitive in our lives and in our work, whatever the relationship between narrative and analysis, art and science, to be truly engaged requires us to look within, and then to muster the courage and the desire to be true to ourselves and not to subordinate our desire to the expectations of others. Books written from such depths carry with them a clear sense of the authenticity of the author's moral vision. This will be clear to the reader, for example, when reading Václav Havel.<sup>37</sup> So, too, with E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class*, a great work of moral compassion in the form of a narrative history that not only tells an important story but also addresses matters of great consequence to historical theory and radical dissent. As with Havel, Edward Thompson did these things by himself, to satisfy himself, writing, as he put it, by candlelight.<sup>38</sup>

A historian seeking the arc of a story that needs to be told must do research using external resources, but she should write from inner necessity, open to possibility and to connecting self and subject. Great works of history, narrative or not, invariably convey the authenticity of publicly expressed yearning. As the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre says, in his book *After Virtue*: 'I can only answer the question, "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question, "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"'<sup>39</sup> In short, before we can get others en-

gaged with the past, we must first gain a sense of who we ourselves are. Then we can use the motive power of inner resource to connect to our readers through the stories we create about the world around us, past and present – stories shaped from within, where our humanity resides.

## NOTES

- 1 Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History; Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing since 1900*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 268. This essay had its origins in my contribution to the round table 'Storytellers in the Archives: The Return of the Historian as Narrator,' at the annual conference of the Canadian Historical Association at Laval University in 2001. Earlier versions of the text served as the 2005 Davidson Dunton Research Lecture at Carleton University and the keynote address at the 2009 McGill-Queen's Graduate Student Conference at Queen's University.
- 2 Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 320.
- 3 See John Clive, 'Trevelyan: The Muse or the Museum?' in Clive, *Not by Fact Alone: Essays on the Writing and Reading of History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 279–80.
- 4 An edited version of Bury's Inaugural Address, 'The Science of History' (1902), is reproduced in Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (New York: Vintage, 1973 [1956]), 209–23; quotation at 223.
- 5 See George Macaulay Trevelyan, 'Clio a Muse,' in Trevelyan, *Clio, a Muse; and Other Essays*, new ed. (London: Longmans, Green, 1930); reproduced in Stern, ed., *Varieties of History*, 227–45.
- 6 Gerard Delanty, *Social Theory in a Changing World: Conceptions of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999).
- 7 See, for example, Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929–89* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990); Georg Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1997); Ernst A. Breisach, *American Progressive History: An Experiment in Modernization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- 8 Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy; Aspects of a Working-Class Life* (London: Chatto, 1957); Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958).
- 9 Jacques Barzun, *Clio and the Doctors: Psycho-history, Quanto-History, & History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The*

- Old History and the New* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).
- 10 Writings on the 'Cultural Studies' movement are voluminous. See, for example, Patrick Brantlinger, *Crusoe's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); John Storey, *Inventing Popular Culture: From Folklore to Globalization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).
  - 11 Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Toronto: Vintage, 2000).
  - 12 Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).
  - 13 An example: Stephen Marche, completing doctoral work in English at the University of Toronto in 2005, wrote a novel, *Raymond and Hanna*, accepted for publication by a major publisher. According to one account, 'His professors never knew and are not particularly impressed by his multitasking. Some have advised him not to put his novel on his résumé when applying for teaching jobs.' Judy Stoffman, 'Looking for love in the 21st century – First-time author writes sexy, multicultural tale,' *Toronto Star*, 12 Feb. 2005.
  - 14 See David H. Friedman, *A Mind of Its Own: A Cultural History of the Penis* (New York: Penguin, 2003); Michel Pastoureau, *The Devil's Cloth: A History of Stripes and Striped Fabric* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Simon Garfield, *Mauve: How One Man Invented a Color that Changed the World* (New York: Norton, 2002); Sophie D. Coe and Michael D. Coe, *The True History of Chocolate* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000); Peter Macinnis, *Bittersweet: The Story of Sugar* (London: Allen and Unwin, 2003); Mark Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground: The History of Coffee and How It Transformed Our World* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Mark Pendergrast, *Mirror Mirror: A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); Henry Petroski, *The Pencil: A History of Design and Circumstance* (New York: Knopf, 1992); Witold Rybczynski, *One Good Turn: A Natural History of the Screwdriver and the Screw* (New York: Scribner's, 2001); Amir D. Aczel, *The Riddle of the Compass: The Invention that Changed the World* (New York: Harvest Books, 2001).
  - 15 Quoted in Emily Eakin, 'Screwdriver Scholars and Pencil Punditry: Society's Material Culture Garners Academic Scrutiny,' *New York Times*, 24 Feb. 2001.
  - 16 A.B. McKillop, *Pierre Berton: A Biography* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2008).
  - 17 C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); Clive, *Not by Fact Alone*; Barbara Tuchman, *Practicing History*:

- Selected Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1981); Peter Gay, *Style in History: Gibbon, Ranke, Macaulay, Burckhardt* (New York: Norton, 1974); Jacques Barzun, *On Writing, Editing, and Publishing: Essays Explicative and Hortative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); J.H. Hexter, *Doing History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971).
- 18 W.L. Morton, 'The Art of Narrative,' *Culture*, 20 (1959): 391, 395. See also Donald Creighton, 'History and Literature,' in Creighton, *Towards the Discovery of Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1972).
- 19 John Franklin, *Writing for Story: Craft Secrets of Dramatic Nonfiction by a Two-Time Pulitzer Prize Winner* (New York: Penguin, 1986); Richard Rhodes, *How to Write: Advice and Reflections* (New York: William Morrow, 1995); David Lodge, *The Practice of Writing: Essays, Lectures, Reviews and a Diary* (New York: Penguin, 1996).
- 20 Alfred Fortunato and Susan Rabiner, *Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction – and Get It Published* (New York: Norton, 2002); Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, expanded [3rd] ed. (New York: Dell, 1994).
- 21 Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).
- 22 Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman: Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem* (New York: Penguin, 1976), 56.
- 23 Miss Thistlebottom is not my invention. See Theodore M. Bernstein, *Miss Thistlebottom's Hobgoblins: The Careful Writer's Guide to the Taboos, Bugbears and Out-Moded Rules of English Usage* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973).
- 24 John Clive, 'Why Read the Great Nineteenth-Century Historians?' in Clive, *Not by Fact Alone: Essays on the Writing and Reading of History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 21–2.
- 25 Josephine Tey, *The Daughter of Time* (London: P. Davies, 1951); Arthur Koestler, *The Case of the Midwife Toad* (London: Hutchinson, 1971). Tey's novel takes the form of a conventional mystery; Koestler's non-fiction tale is a kind of 'whydunit,' and with a conclusion worthy of O. Henry. Both are masterpieces of suspense.
- 26 Elie Halévy, *England in 1815* (London: Ernest Benn, 1961 [1913]).
- 27 Two representative examples are Wilbur Smith, *River God* (London: Macmillan, 1993); Gerald Seymour, *Traitor's Kiss* (London: Corki, 2003). See also Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations* (New York: Knopf, 1991); Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).
- 28 Gay, *Style in History*, 219.
- 29 The origins and nature of 'selfhood' are subject to extensive scholarly

- investigation and debate. Is 'self' inherent to the human condition or a matter of experiential construction? Recent scholarship suggests the latter, which is why, in my title, the word 'self' is not preceded by the definite article. See *Cultural Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion*, Richard A. Shweder and R.A. LeVine, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
- 30 John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography of John Stuart Mill* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1924).
- 31 Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- 32 Maurois quoted in Leon Edel, *Literary Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 8.
- 33 Butler said this at the conclusion of an experimental electronic workshop, 'Inside Creative Writing,' in which he taught creative writing by drafting a short story in 'real time' over the Internet. The seventeen sessions, conducted over a three-week period in October and November, 2001, were broadcast from his office at Florida State University, Tallahassee.
- 34 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 713.
- 35 See Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* (New York: Harcourt, 2003); Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987); Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*. See also *Thinking about Feeling: Contemporary Philosophers on Emotion*, R.C. Solomon, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Ronald de Sousa and Adam Morton, 'Emotional Truth,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplemental Volume*, 86 (2002): 247–75. See also Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: Norton, 1997), 363–424, esp. 372–4; R.H. Frank, *Passions within Reason: The Strategic Role of the Emotions* (New York: Norton, 1988).
- 36 Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, 146.
- 37 See Václav Havel, 'Paradise Lost,' *New York Review of Books*, 39/7 (9 April 1992); Václav Havel, *Summer Meditations* (New York: Knopf, 1992); both translated from the Czech by Paul Wilson.
- 38 E.P. Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight* (London: Merlin, 1980); Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollanz, 1963).
- 39 MacIntyre quoted in Robert Fulford, *The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture* (Toronto: Anansi, 1999), 33.