

Prologue to a Work of History and Anthropology

Once asked about the meaning of life, the historian of consciousness Julian Jaynes responded:

This question has no answer except in the history of how it came to be asked. There is no answer because *words* have meaning, not life or persons or the universe itself. Our search for certainty rests in our attempts at understanding the history of all individual selves and all civilizations. Beyond that, there is only awe. (Jaynes 1988: 89–90)

History and anthropology as commonly conceived are quests for certainty, disciplines in which those so engaged strain to contrive palliatives for the needling uncertainty that beleaguers the modern mind. Life, the past, “civilization,” humankind are revealed as meaningful, comprehensible—each individual component a stage in a progressive evolution. Otherness, that which resists emplacement within our grand schemes, when suspected is instinctively distilled to sameness, any remainder denied—we are convinced that “however, different, strange, or bizarre they may appear, Others are essentially and fundamentally the Same as ‘us’” (Argyrou 2002: 11).¹ This deceit masks other possibilities, of sameness as a constellation of otherness. Might it be “that before an individual man had an interior self, he unconsciously first posited it in others, particularly contradictory strangers, as the thing that caused their different and bewildering behavior” (Jaynes 1976: 217)? The Other subjectifying the Self. Western thought, it can be argued, owes its very possibility as well as its contours to a contradictory otherness; this system of thought developed alongside, in mutual interaction with, the West’s imperialist projects. Now hegemonic, but still ceaselessly striving for sovereignty, it attempts to identify and assimilate otherness where it can still be found—a “relentless recognition of the Other by assimilation,”

1 It is sometimes said that anthropologists and the like are concerned mainly with difference (e.g., Agawu 2003). However, this is belied by the familiar categories—those seemingly neutral “middle terms”—through which we investigate others and that create the Other in “our” own image: e.g., religion, economy, technology, music, culture, society. It may be more appropriate to say that anthropology is concerned with diversity (i.e., relative similarity and variation) rather than difference (cf. Bhabha 1994: 49–52).

Spivak (1988: 294) called it. For the hegemonic mind, can that which cannot be assimilated still be thought?

The historical and contemporaneous Other—the objects of the disciplines of history and anthropology—must not be collapsed in thought, nor, perhaps, should one collapse “local” and “foreign” others; yet thinking and writing about each involves similar questions and movements. Both involve a consideration of difference, a movement away from the Self or the Same, a movement in each case conditioned by the constitution of the researcher. It may appear that “I always come to my material with the questions that I have asked of it (rather than its seeking me out in my office and dumping its problems in my lap)” (Goldstein 1999: 38), but from whence do these questions, even the need to question, arrive? Why ask questions of the elsewhere, the elsewhere? The present asks us to ask specific questions about past (and future) presents, one cultural horizon asks us to interrogate another.² This is so at least if the present recognizes itself as a present and a culture recognizes itself as a culture. For there is no home without the unhomey, and the former desires—is called, but not without equivocation, to—the latter.

One comes to a research project through chance, circumstance, suggestion, coincidence—through occurrences outside of oneself, over which one often has little control. Although we may “come to the material,” the desire for the material has already come to us, is already operating within us, drawing us to it. In this sense the Other does indeed seek us out in our offices, dumping its problems in our laps like an impetuous student. However, a decision must be made regarding the nature of our response, of our work; this decision may return us to the Same, or perhaps draw us radically unto the Other: “*A work conceived radically is a movement of the same unto the other which never returns to the same*” (Levinas 1986: 348).

The historian or anthropologist is compelled to wander in history or culture, but in what

2 As Seymour Martin Lipset puts it, “Those who know only one country know no country” (1996: 17).

manner is s/he compelled to wander, to what effect? Levinas counterposes Ulysses and Abraham. We may recall Horkheimer and Adorno's depiction of Odysseus, that "prototype of the bourgeois individual, whose concept originates in the unwavering self-assertion of which the protagonist driven to wander the earth is the primeval model" (2002: 35). The hero "throws himself away ... in order to win himself" (ibid.: 38), facing danger and even death in order to achieve the unity of a self. The anthropologist—at least the white, male anthropologist—is often conceived in such terms; however much we might deny it, the intrepid, privileged adventurers of yore endure in the recesses of our psyches: "I wanted to escape, to see another reality; I wanted to be able to come back and tell stories of other places, and to understand and criticize this place better" (Dubois 1995: 312). The Biblical Abraham, on the other hand, "leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land, and forbids his servant to even bring back his son to the point of departure" (Levinas 1986: 348). The work of the Self in this mode is a "one-way action" unto the Other, a gift without the possibility of gratitude, without the coinciding of agent and outcome—a "being-for-beyond-my-death" (ibid.: 349). Levinas calls us beyond instrumental or economic modes of thought, beyond the return or the exchange.

Can we heed such a call? It is in the nature of the activity—it is in our job description—that the historian/anthropologist return home, "to tell stories of other places ... to understand and criticize [her/his own] place better." To fully capitulate to the Other—to "go native"—would be to disregard one's responsibilities to the others of one's "own" place and time—would be to substitute one group of others for another. This can be done, but it is no solution: the Self is always torn between multiple Others, must decide among them without being certain of the consequences. The Self is besieged by obligations it cannot fulfill. And yet by returning from the "field," to know even that return is possible if not imminent, do we not (for example) "merely harvest the brilliant effects of a civilization for which [we are] not responsible" (Barthes 1985:

299)? We can never be a *native* of another place and time; but must we remain only a *citizen* of our own place and time? “Citizen-of-the-world”: in this vacuous phrase there is possibility. To be a citizen is to be (held) responsible for a place; to be beyond a citizen of our home, to be a citizen of elsewhere or elsewhen . . . we must find ourselves already responsible elsewhere, implicated elsewhere, a hostage of the elsewhere.

What is the nature of this citizenly responsibility? We have the responsibility to respond. Research involves relationships: to the living, to the dead, to the yet-to-be. It is social, ethical—research is also life, or rather living. To research is to live. It is not (or not only) an accumulation of “facts” but a conversation (of which we are often deaf). It is to allow ourselves—if research is to do more than reinforce the known—to learn, and this learning can only take place, paradoxically, outside the research project, in those moments where the conversation exceeds the bounds of the project. What is this learning? It is the Self being called into question, the (momentary) expelling of the I from the Self (the unlearning of the Self), “the welcom[ing] of the absolutely other” (Levinas 1986: 353). Learning not to unearth answers but to cultivate questions. Is the encounter with another to be a moment of domination (the enforcement of research parameters, a march-step along a teleology) or of dialog?³

Representing and Knowing

It is by now a cliché to say that history is constructed, yet we cannot escape this pronouncement. The human mind cannot grasp totality as totality: “every object . . . encompasses an infinite number of aspects, and only the intention of the cognitive subject decides among them” (Adorno 1991: 15; cf. Miller 1987)—an intention that is socially, cultural, historically, biologically constrained. The concerns of the present constrain (however “unconsciously”) our

3 In principle, of course, these two are not mutually exclusive.

consciousness of the past (i.e., we look at the past through the eyes of the present), and “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (Benjamin 1969: 255). The same is true anthropologically (e.g., see Clifford 1986). A historiographic/ethnographic work then is not an objective representation of the Other; it is a representation of a unique and ephemeral, “objectively subjective” engagement with the Other, regardless of whether the author acknowledges this (cf. Benjamin 1973: 29).

But not just any Other. Only a finite number of historical/phenomenal Others can be responded to or attended to by any individual Self. One has to decide among them without firm criteria, one has to move forward on shifting ground. Anthropology and history must choose and never know the full implications of their choices. But not everything calls for representation at any given time; perhaps nothing calls for representation at all ever, as representation is but one possibility course among many. Although one must respond, must decide and move ahead, the content of the response is not fully determined. One need not “know”; we choose to know—to represent the Other—and this choice is significant.

Geertz famously suggested that:

The claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its author’s ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, *to reduce the puzzlement*—what manner of men are these?—to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise. (1973: 16; italics added)

And yet we might remain suspicious of attempts to depuzzle others. By what right may we do that, for what purposes may that serve? To what end do we squeeze the Other in the iron fist of knowing? Do we not then precisely carry it home with us, “like a mask or a carving”? Benjamin states, “Knowledge is possession. Its very object is determined by the fact that it must be taken possession of ... ” (1998: 29). Knowledge *grasps*; but, like all grasping tools, it grasps only what its structure allows it to, forgetting the rest. There may indeed be circumstances under

which reducing our puzzlement over the Other has a salutary effect. But there is also a potential (Foucault might say *certain*) complicity of knowing with domination insofar as it prepares the other for administration by whatever forces currently threaten to consume us. Argyrou reminds us that, for all anthropology's intended opposition to racism and ethnocentrism, "There is no paradigm that has not reproduced down the road the very divisions of the world that, ironically, it sets out to eradicate" (2002: 26–7). Knowing—even in ostensible opposition to prejudice—benefits the knower and his/her tendency to dominate the object.⁴

For both Benjamin and Foucault, among others, writing history is a means of critique of the present. Likewise, anthropology and its findings are used to critique dominant European/US cultures. The representation of the Other serves to destabilize/delegitimize the Same. As needed as this may be, is this not also to instrumentalize the Other? Does the Other become merely the "loyal opposition" to the Same? If so, is this justifiable? Justifiable under what circumstances? Is the movement toward the Other always fated to terminate in the Same?

The Status of the Material Trace

In an aside Jan Goldstein notes that, having discovered how to "bend a text into saying almost anything" as student of English literature, she shifted to "intellectual and cultural history," feeling a need to expose herself to the "external resistance" of "factors outside the text" (1999: 40). On the one hand, there are those (Adorno perhaps) who would argue that, on the contrary, a literary text does provide its own objective resistances to—or rules for—interpretation, to be

4 Also cf. Bhabha (1994: 46):

However impeccably the content of an "other" culture may be known, however anti-ethnocentrically it is represented, it is its *location* as the closure of grand theories, the demand that, in analytic terms, it be always the good object of knowledge, the docile body of difference, that reproduces a relation of domination and is the most serious indictment of the institutional powers of critical theory.

And Derrida (1997: 80): "each time that ethnocentrism is precipitately and ostentatiously reversed, some effort silently hides behind all the spectacular effects to consolidate an inside and to draw from it some domestic benefit."

ignored at the reader's own peril; likewise, it hardly needs to be pointed out that history can be "bent into saying almost anything." On the other hand, if there are factors outside the historical (or cultural) text constraining our interpretation, are these not merely more texts? The past (or the present, for that matter) does not (and cannot) reach us as pure, unmediated reality—a truly-it-was-thus—that confirms or contradicts our understanding of a text (or event, etc.). Indeed, a text and "the past" are perhaps not so different as we often imagine. The past, in fact, is hardly more than a collection of texts, written or remembered, each of which can be variously and multiply interpreted. These texts holding over from the past, holding pastness over into the present—these mediatory fragments of the "said"—are the materials of the historiographer/ethnographer.

History begins with the inscription; but to begin "properly," some might say, it must begin with the *rational*, or *rationalized*, inscription. W. W. Hunter begins the second volume of his history of Odisha optimistically enough:

In India, as soon as a Province comes into permanent contact with the Muhammadans, its history emerges from the wonder-land of Temple Archives and Sacred Song; and becomes only a question of patient industry, in searching out the fragmentary allusions to it in the Musalmán manuscripts. (Hunter 1872: vol. II, 1)

But immediately the situation darkens.

But unhappily these new materials do not form straight paths converging to a common conclusion, but a labyrinth of cross-roads intersecting each other at the most perplexing angles; and which, after wiling on the traveler in the hope of new discoveries, often stop short in the midst of some trackless jungle. Whenever two sources of material exist, Indian history finds itself reduced to an unsatisfactory reconciliation of conflicting evidence. *No sooner does it dare to be critical than it becomes inconclusive ...*⁵ (ibid.: vol. II, 2; italics added)

History as wonder-land, as labyrinth dissipating into jungle. Hoodwinked even by the more reasonable Muhammadan conquerors, what is the industrious annalist to do? How is he to orient himself? No sooner does he "dare to be critical" than history dissolves into inconclusivity, truth

⁵ The sentence continues: "... , and passes beyond the open and sunny domain of the annalist into the dim regions of antiquarian research."

becomes undecidable.

Critical, of a *crisis*, a moment of undecidability in which we must be decisive. Yet this “problem” is also, we might recognize today, immanent to the very structure of the historical enterprise: that is, the impossibility of doing history—of constructing a unity from disunity, of accessing past living beyond the evidentiary “said”—is the very condition of doing history: It *is* what historiography *is*. Inconclusivity per se should not send us scurrying to the antiquarian, as Hunter goes on to suggest—although there may be good reasons to consult the antiquarian—for the material is in its *essence* inconclusive (its essence is inconclusivity). For what is this material but a trace, and a trace in itself can never be conclusive. How is a trace inconclusive? The material (or phenomenal) trace, remaining after the will or event that inscribed it have passed, provides only partial and indeterminate access to what lies beyond it—to the life beyond it. If a historical source—a material trace—is the work of a will, neither this will nor its intentions are ever fully extinguished in the work: “I am not entirely what I want to do” (Levinas 1969: 228), nor am I entirely what I do: “From the work I am only deduced and am already ill-understood, betrayed rather than expressed” (ibid.: 176). The significance of the material trace—its “meaning”—is posited by the historian. Hunter implicitly recognizes this: “once within historic ground, the difficulty is, not to find materials, but to control them, and to bring them within the limits which can properly be assigned to them in this work” (1872: vol. I, 170). If the materials are to be controlled or limited in the writing of a history (and the material traces themselves are always limited in quantity if not in signification), then in what sense is a history related to a past that is unlimited? A history that is *controlled*, that is coherent, that presents unity in the face of disunity, forgets the possibility of the past and reifies the present of the historiographer—the past and present are synchronized. Moreover, a history that is a collocation of material traces (e.g., the work of the annalist) is a history of effects, and ideological to the extent that we believe it to

be the history of the others that caused them. The annalist attempts to fill up “homogeneous, empty time” (Benjamin 1969: 262) with the events signaled by the material traces of the past—that “mass of data”—s/he has collected. The diachrony of the Other is recuperated into the synchrony of the Same. But as the lives of others always exceed the traces left in their wake, so they exceed, must be recognized to exceed, our historiographic and ethnographic representations. The inadequacy of representation must be a formal property of the work of representation. As was said of Certeau’s method, “The historian thus examines the documents, not in order to discover where they corroborate one another, but instead to find out where they contradict one another”; he leads us not to a unitary explanation but along the path of “a series of ever more precise questions” (Weymans 2004: 169).

Victors and Subalterns

History, it is said, tends to be the history of the victors, or of the elites: that is, those with the power to inscribe their exploits into the historical record—or to have them inscribed there by their followers. The “subaltern,” the non-elite, the overlooked—the peasant, the servant, the slave, the “people”—have more recently become concerns of postcolonial historiography (and were somewhat earlier concerns of Marxist historiography). To the extent that this defines the project, however, it may remain colonial. To return again to Hunter’s Romantic, nineteenth century prose:

Ancient history too often appears like one of the mediæval cities of the Low Countries, visible far across the plains, but of which the traveller discerned nothing but the minster-spire, the prince’s schloss, and an occasional flash of steel upon the walls. Yet priests, and kings, and soldiers were no more the sole inhabitants of the ancient world than they are of our own. They only happen to wear clothes very easily seen at a distance. If we can get near enough to the town, a great din of obscure industry strikes our ears; and for each stately edifice that towers above the walls there are a thousand swarming habitations, too low to be seen from without, but which make the city within. (1872: vol. I, 169)

The victors tend to be the visible, and indeed the “judgment of history is set forth in the visible” (Levinas 1969: 243). By paying closer attention—by an ever-finer combing of material and phenomenal traces—we can, of course, discover the not-yet-visible and offer it to the light of knowledge—though this again may only be a recuperation of the Other by the Same. Still, a choice must be made as to the objects of historiography. But what of the invisible, that which *cannot* be made visible? The invisible—the *offense* of “the judgment of visible history” (Levinas 1969: 243), the *betrayal* of the saying by the said (Levinas 1998: 6)—must still be manifested or allowed to irrupt or unwind between the breaks of the visible. The unrepresentable, the beyond representation, must be represented . . . but by whom? This is not only the responsibility of the writing, it is the responsibility of the reading. Perhaps even primarily the responsibility of the reading, though the writing must let this reading come to pass.

Postcolonial historiography was not an overthrow of colonial historiography but an intensification (or attempted expiation?) of some of its tenets. Similarly “postmodern/poststructuralist,” or heterodox (as Argyrou [2002] calls it), ethnography did not overthrow modernist ethnography; rather it “modernized ethnological modernity” (Argyrou 2002: 77) by becoming reflexive. Now, continuing to investigate others, we also claim to know ourselves—to possess a God-like knowledge of subject and object. Do subaltern history and reflexive anthropology, by supplying what was “missing” in earlier paradigms, merely allow business-as-usual to proceed? Can the recuperation of the subaltern by historiography be radicalized, so that it becomes not merely the “loyal opposition” to the powers-that-be? It may be, as Benjamin claimed, that “empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers” (1969: 256); but under what conditions does empathy with the subaltern benefit the subaltern? Does this empathy too, and the processes of “information retrieval” that seek to impress us with it, “cohere with the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the

advancement of learning and civilization” (Spivak 1988: 295)?

That is, can the postcolonial escape the colonial, the postmodern the modern? Anthropology and history, at least as commonly practiced, are ontologically or metaphysically grounded disciplines—disciplines in which the Self *knows*. Therefore it could be said that, to the extent that they claim to discover or generate truth or knowledge—of victors *or* subalterns—they repress the Other. Others cannot speak *for themselves* through the Self; the said of their speech consolidates the subjectification of the Self: “Historiography recounts the way survivors appropriate the works of dead wills to themselves; it rests on the usurpation carried out by the conquerors, that is, by the survivors; it recounts enslavement, forgetting the life that struggles against slavery” (Levinas 1969: 228). History is numb to life. History is history of things, things separated from the wills that willed them, a history of events without the lives that lived them. At its truest the postcolonialist work is a work of endless mourning for the suffering that has necessitated it, for the sufferers that lie beyond its powers of retrieval.

Suffering and Blood

Outside the concert hall where I and other middle-class patrons lose ourselves in cascading, undulating streams of sound, child ragpickers sift through the heaps of refuse we have left behind in the streets. (This situation is mirrored historically in the functioning of the region’s princely estates.) It is all too easy to imagine that there is no connection between the, admittedly, seemingly modest confines of the auditorium (we are not at the Met, though the venue matters little) and the “immodest” world of the back alley. The fact that the one has so far never existed without the other does not imply a final and necessary link. Under prevailing and historically pertaining conditions, however, the “cultural treasures” we comfortably enjoy “owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to

the anonymous toil of their contemporaries” (Benjamin 1969: 256). How is it possible for one to face the grandest effects of civilization without discerning the crumpled bodies underneath, to ignore the blood that stains our finest treasures?

For if, as Benjamin polemically suggests, “[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,”⁶ this is no less true of the work of historiography or ethnography—each itself a “document of civilization”—that documents these documents. If the “cultural treasures” we survey “have an origin [we] cannot contemplate without horror,” (Benjamin 1969: 256), likewise the historiographer and ethnographer cannot contemplate his or her own work without horror. This horror, this offense, needs to manifest itself, needs to uncoil in the very structure of the work. This too, however, is not enough if the horrifying conditions continue to perpetuate themselves. Even texts abraded by the unthinkable can have their “uses.” Seeking illumination or justice we prize away the keys to civilization’s terrible secrets only to be, in our turn, swallowed by the beast.

Mourning

One simplistic criticism of Foucault suggests that, while he has “often changed the way we think about and write history,” he has offered no “workable alternative historiographic paradigms that could hold up to his own critique” (Valdés 1999: 101). Indeed. I would go so far as to say that our critiques *must* always be more powerful than our paradigms, for even the most multifaceted and comprehensive of our paradigms fail to account in any absolute way for their objects. The point is not to construct a model of history (or culture, etc.) that can withstand critique (everything deconstructs, all the way down, even deconstruction); it is to (de)construct a model of -graphy that critiques itself, or in any case does not varnish over the cracks within

6 Also cf., inter alia, Adorno ([1967] 1981: 34).

which its critique manifests; it is, as Foucault himself says, to look with a “dissociating view that is capable of decomposing itself” (1977: 153), or perhaps a view that offers itself up to decomposition.

Foucault need not escape the panopticon; but he and we must continue to be aware of its totalizing (composing) gaze. There can be no problem-free scholarship in a problem-laden world. Perhaps the best one can do is to bear (or even bare) the unbearable contradictions one faces (and embodies) in one’s work immanently, without attempting to resolve them into a “spurious harmony,” as Adorno might describe it (see Adorno [1967] 1981: 32). The work as a physiognomy tattooed with contradiction. We must allow these problems to continue to irritate us, even—or especially—when they appear insurmountable: We must operate by an ethics of perpetual irritability. “History is never sure” (Certeau 2000), nor is anthropology or its objects; -graphy is waiting—patience—the *marking* of a question. The work not an absolute betrayal is also a work of mourning, a endless mourning that is an obsession with the absent Other—or the Otherness that absents from within us, an Otherness that absconds with the I from within; mourning that is an obsession with the *betrayal* of the absent Other, the justiceless Other for which we are immemorially, absolutely responsible; endless because the end of mourning is a return to the Same. For the question in the afflicted world there is no answer, only a yet more precise questioning. Beyond questioning there is only awe.

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