

Historical Imagination and the Human Experience

Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

-Inferno, Canto I

The path trodden by historians is as varied as the people whom find the vocation to be their calling. Indeed, those of us who embark upon the arduous journey to become professional historians very much understand the work to be a calling. To many of us, to take up the craft is to undertake a life-long pilgrimage at the behest of Clio. While every historian is drawn to the discipline for their own reasons, there are certain principles which are shared in common by us all. While it is likely that at some point in the future students and scholars will utilize techniques vastly different from those of today, the duties of the historian have thus far remained immutable from the time of antiquity.

The training of the historian begins with their first realization that they have a *passion* for historical inquiry. Without first having this passion, this desire, a person cannot reasonably expect to advance as a historian. Far too frequently, and it is unfortunate, people are wont to view the discipline as dull and dusty, esoteric and ultimately useless. Yet, those who choose to undertake the journey can scarcely consider doing anything else but pursue that Muse which first lit their mind, entangling them in the embrace of inquiry. The historian does history "...for the pure pleasure, for the excitement of the hunt, for satisfactions that are as palpably sensuous as

they are cerebral”.¹ If one is not fully ensnared, devout to the craft, the journey is likely to prove beyond their capacity, as history demands their all.

What it is the individual may find tantalizing about history is unique to them. Some may be searching for answers, more often than not about themselves. Others may be seeking an escape. For me, it was the latter. As a youth I was convinced that all the greatest adventures, the great discoveries, the battles of good and evil, were lost in the days of yore. All that remained were the bard’s songs, the captain’s logs, and the accounts of great men whom I was doomed to never meet nor contend with. For hours I would pour over the printed accounts of Bartholomew Roberts and Marco Polo, or scour antique stores for any piece of memorabilia from the Civil War or World War II just to be able to have a physical connection to the days gone by. Passion. There is much one can make up for with hard work, but little can be done to make up for passion. Training and discipline can only keep someone locked away in the archives for so long. Passion can keep them there until the volumes have returned to dust, the origins of us all.

Once the student of history realizes they do indeed possess passion, exercising and understanding the utility of the imagination becomes crucial. To the uninitiated, it may be confusing as to why an academic would value something as abstract as imagination. Yet, apart from passion, the imagination is the historian’s most valuable asset. The primary goal of the historian is to formulate a narrative. It is an excellent thing for a student to be adept at memorizing facts and dates and to write complete sentences. Yet without an imagination, one cannot hope to be a historian. This is because in order to be able to ask the necessary questions to formulate a narrative the historian must be adept at making the sources yield their information.

¹ Michael Kammen, “Vanitas and the Historian’s Vocation,” *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 10, No.4 (Dec., 1982): 22.

The primary sources, the very lifeblood of the discipline, do not simply arrange into a coherent, complete narrative waiting for dissemination. Rather, it is the historian who is tasked with extricating from the annals of the world any scrap of meaning they may contain. The story of the sources only takes shape when the historian is imaginative enough to ask of them the right questions.² Without being able to shape a narrative the historian may well be left with a lovely collection of letters, files, and diaries, but no meaning. Learning to ask the right questions is the very foundation of the historians' craft. The *problématique* sends the historian on the path to find answers, yet the question must be asked first. The question should be one that will fill gaps in understanding once answered, but it takes an imaginative historian to first identify those gaps.

Further, we need to understand, that even once the historian has determined what the 'right' questions are, the questions are useless in and of themselves. The historian then gains the task of providing answers. The best historical questions are only as good as the answers they generate.³ However, the great paradox of historical inquiry is that more often than not the quest for answers simply yields further questions, or proves to the historian that he was in fact not asking the right questions to begin with. The difficulties that face the historian are that his task is that of trying to understand human consciousness, the very subject matter and reality of history.⁴ Frequently, the difficulties in finding answers to the object of our inquiries lie in the beguiling nature of humanity. If the human condition became readily understood, the disciplines that comprise the social sciences would become obsolete. At present, I would assert this is not the case in the least. How then does one go about answering the questions posed by their imagination? This is where the mechanics of historical training become readily apparent.

² Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives* (New Haven and London: Yale, 2013), 12.

³ David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970), 40.

⁴ Marc Bloch *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 151.

When first I set out to begin my formal education I was convinced that the only correct approach to the discipline was that of the detached and dispassionate observer. In my mind the imagination was reserved for the actual writing of the narrative once all the ‘facts’ had been gathered in order to make the narrative tolerable to read. Over time, I realized that by relegating the imagination to this sequestered position I was robbing my inquiry of a certain depth and richness. I was guilty of attempting to treat the historical craft as a “hard science”, rather than understanding it for the “social” science that it is. The human condition is rarely, if ever, understood in the same context as immutable laws of physics or biology. While I have always possessed an imagination, I was always certain that implementing it outside of a narrow arena would yield poor, dishonest, results. I severely handicapped myself for some time with this thinking. I failed in being able to ask the right questions, because I was certain there were concrete answers to every question, thus I framed my questions as such. Rather than seeking to interpret the sources and draw out the meaning, I believed the sources would yield certainty in every case.

If historical facts are not akin to the facts that a scientist utilizes, what then is the historian to base his assumptions on? Can the historian ever divine *truth* from the myriad, the great chaos that are the Sources? Like science, history too has a method. Unlike the scientist though, whose experiments are both visible and repeatable, the historian is condemned never to witness the subject of his method. Nor can the historian repeat what has happened. Time is the destroyer of all things, and the historian can never escape time.⁵ Events are what we study, and once those events occur, they are gone forever.⁶ Great though the challenges are which face the pilgrims of historical scholarship, such difficulties are not insurmountable. While there is no

⁵ Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 156. *Bhagavad Gita* 11:32.

⁶ Carl Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian”, *The American Historical Review* Vol. 37, No. 2 (Jan., 1932): 221.

gospel to the historical trade that all practitioners are bound to follow, certain axioms have become standard through time.⁷

Primarily, the historian ought to remember his greatest tool, that of his mind. Passion and imagination are necessary qualities of the historian, yet the undisciplined mind will derail even the most earnest and imaginative historian. As a rule, every historian must first understand his own mind. So how does the historian achieve the state of mind necessary to undertake historical inquiry? First, it is necessary to achieve understanding. The act of thinking historically is wholly unnatural to the way we learned to think, and make no mistake, we were taught from a young age *how* to think. The historian must extricate himself from his perception of how the world *is* if he is to hope to understand how the world *was*.⁸ The historian must be the most practiced in empathy. The physicist needs no understanding of human nature to divine the movement of matter through space. Yet, a historian cannot afford the inability to perceive the experiences of others.⁹

The necessity of developing an empathetic mind lies at the very core of what historians do. The development of this skill is why the imagination is so crucial to the historian. The subjects of our discipline are wholly unlike ourselves. The historical subject lived in a different world from our own. They responded to different pressures, were subject to different experiences, perceived reality in a way we do not, cannot. If one cannot learn to empathize with these foreign figures, their work will forever be blighted by prejudice and hopelessly myopic.

⁷ This statement should be qualified: The individual historian is the product of the philosophy of the school of thought he was trained in. Such is the nature of historical training. Every historian brings a different talent and perspective to the field. For the sake of discussion, these are the rules under which I trained, and are well represented throughout the current academic discipline in the modern American academe.

⁸ While it is impossible to fully comprehend the world that was, we flatter ourselves with thinking we can catch fleeting glimpses.

⁹ Sam Wineburg, "Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts", *Kaplan Classic* Vol.92, No.4 (Dec., 2010): 93.

The historian must never attempt to see the subjects of the past on his own terms. The historian, however incompletely, must meet those subjects where they are. Though the chasm is wide, and the attempts will forever fall short, the goal of historical inquiry is to learn what we cannot see.¹⁰

Frequently, what the historian finds in the past is shocking to the “modern” sensibilities. Students of history, still locked in their perceptions of how the world *is*, are quick to make judgements and condemnations of historical characters. Learning to lay aside prejudice is among the first steps towards attaining an empathetic mind. One of the great ironies of our time is how fashionable it is to be “unprejudiced” towards the living and breathing members of society. Yet how quick the virtuous are to condemn those separated by a far greater distance than the physical for their historical “sins”. To castigate the dead of a different age is the antithesis of historical inquiry. Yet, it would appear that there are those who are so certain of themselves and the age in which they exist as to be able to divide their forebears into the just and the damned.¹¹ So then, the historian has passion, imagination, and an empathetic mind. What then is he to do with these tools? How does one hone their craft, asking the right questions to find the right answers?

When Marco Polo set out on his transcontinental journey to the Far East in the thirteenth century, he did so with a purpose. Polo, a Venetian merchant, was on a journey of commerce, seeking to profit from his travels. Initially, Polo had not intended on becoming a writer nor, I would argue, a historian. While much of what he wrote was contemporary to himself, he also included numerous accounts of history, thus making him a historian of sorts. The relevance of Polo to the student seeking to be a historian is that Polo knew how to be selective in his accounts. Polo’s account of his travels spanned twenty years, crossed deserts, mountains, rivers, and valleys. Polo records the lives of dozens of peoples, locations, and missions. Had he thought to

¹⁰ Ibid, 86.

¹¹ Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, 140.

include every bit of minutiae it is likely he would still be sitting in Genoese prison dictating to the corpse of Rusticello.

Likewise, the historian must understand the utility of his work and how to be selective if he is to profit. To be a historian is to undertake a journey through time, every bit as monumental as that of Marco Polo. Frequently, I have seen people refer to history as an *art* rather than a *craft*. This distinction may seem a matter of semantics, yet I do not believe this to be so. History is *not* an “art”. History is very much a craft. The difference between an art and a craft lies simply in the utility. A portrait painter is an artist. A carpenter is a craftsman. A portrait, aside from being aesthetically pleasing, is ultimately a useless object. Whereas, the work of the carpenter is utilitarian, it provides something that is necessary to the purchaser. Both the works of the artist and the craftsmen can be equally beautiful, yet only the work of the craftsman is of service. We wish to use history insofar as it serves the living.¹² Anything short of this aim is vainglorious, an attribute which the academe possess in excess already.

If history is the memory of things said and done, and the historian is seeking to provide utility, how then does he select what is necessary to ask his questions and find his answers?¹³ If the historian seeks relevance in his own time, it is necessary then that he be aware of his own time. While it may sound somewhat self-congratulatory, the historian has the obligation of “explaining a culture to itself”.¹⁴ This obligation is the very utility for which the historian strives to attain. Thus, with a passionate, imaginative, and empathetic mind, the historian needs find his utility and begin the process of sorting the wheat from the chaff. The process of uncovering and

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche., Ian C. Johnson, trans., “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life” in *Untimely Meditations* (1874), 1.

¹³ Becker, “Everyman”, 223.

¹⁴ Kammen, “Vanitas”, 12.

interpreting facts to further the utility of history is necessary exhaustive. The historian, necessarily selective, begins the task of interpreting the facts, and making the sources useful.¹⁵

The notion that the historian interprets facts *prima facie* seems problematic to many in the public. Frequently, the term “revisionist” is applied derisively to the historian who dares interpret facts in a way that is not held in consensus with popular history. The revisionist historian is frequently derided as failing to be “objective”, accused of malicious motives. Many who have not waded through the waters of the archives and sources labor under the delusion that historical facts exist in a space independently of the historian’s interpretation.¹⁶ This is a dangerous delusion, though likely one propagated to comfort the unthinking and egotistical.¹⁷ Ideally, history would be written and disseminated amongst an educated and thoughtful citizenry for the benefit of understanding their culture.¹⁸ The educational system has some work to do on this point. Now, if the historian is to be an imaginative and empathetic interpreter of facts, capable of explaining facets of culture for useful consumption, by what process does he do this?

The selecting of facts, and the subsequent process of interpreting the same, is no mean feat. Indeed, the hardest act in the world for one passionate about their research is not deciding to include something; it is declaring a source useless and unimportant. The historian will have to make judgements, as that is his job. Simply because the historian has come across a document in an archive that says such-and-such does not mean the document is noteworthy. The document can only tell us what the author of the same thought about an issue or event, or what he thought he thought.¹⁹ The document is thus largely unimportant, until through his judgement the historian

¹⁵ Edward Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Knopf, 1961), 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 1.

¹⁸ Kammen, “Vanitas”, 15.

¹⁹ Carr, *What is History*, 16.

displays the relevance through interpretation. The historian must have the ability to take the common and reshape it into what is uncommon; explaining why a dusty pension file from a century ago maintains any significance to contemporary culture. Thus, the person of experience and reflection writes history.²⁰ It is this practice of judgement and interpretation that provides the gulf between the hard sciences and the social, much to the credit of the latter I would argue.

Once the historian has learned to empathize with his subjects, sharpened the skills of analysis and judgment, learned to reflect critically upon himself and the facts of the world that was, he is finally prepared to begin presenting his argument. The crafting of the argument into a coherent narrative, this is the very soul of what it is to *do* history. Without the argument, the interpreted sources, the facts, would remain forever silent, useless to posterity. It is in crafting the argument that even some of the best researchers of facts are brought low, proven to be little more than pretenders. It is in presenting their argument the historian is able to explain relevance, to show the connections, to expand upon the human condition. Without the argument, the historian is simply a storyteller. The argument must incorporate all of the best qualities of the historian: his passion, imagination, empathy, and judgement. Yet, there is a further quality that must also be present: integrity

Throughout the gathering of information to begin shaping a narrative there are numerous opportunities for a historian to err. The use of faulty logic in drawing a conclusion, the failure of properly interrogating a source, and other such benign imperfections can damage the credibility of the argument. The debate over how history is made useful has led to the evolution of thought among historians over time. While historians have never had a license to lie, as mentioned they

²⁰ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 25.

are expected to make judgement calls when it comes to selecting facts to build their argument.²¹ In this, the historian must maintain integrity, not “cherry picking” only the evidence which furthers a particular narrative, while excluding that which may counter their argument. There is not an immutable way to interpret facts. Every historian brings their own unique perspective to the conversation; naturally, their work reflects their experiences. This is not to say though that a historian should ever present a biased and prejudice perspective, interpreting sources to say things for which no credible evidence exists.

Every historian has his own ideological view of the world. This view will naturally manifest in their approach to the work they do. However, if one is maintain integrity in their work, the way in which they present their argument should be free of partisanship, the agenda being only to interpret an unprejudiced narrative.²² Scholars within academe contest this view; however, I would assert that by allowing contemporary political wrangling to permeate through the profession we are failing in the first responsibility of the historian; using the past to aid the present and future. Instead, we commit the crime of trying to interpret the dead past through the eyes of the living present. It is not in the spirit of empathy that ideologues wield carefully chosen facts to further a political agenda.²³

While much goes into the training of the historian, I have selected more the personal characteristics necessary to be successful in the craft, rather than the more banal “how to” steps of practice. This is because it is my contention that these are the incorporeal attributes necessary to begin comprehending the human experience. Much of the human experience is itself

²¹ Peter Charles Hoffer, *Past Imperfect: Facts, Fictions, Fraud—American History from Bancroft and Parkman to Ambrose, Bellesiles, Ellis, and Goodwin* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007), 19.

²² Kammen, “Vanitas”, 15.

²³ Hoffer, *Past Imperfect*, 231.

*Lawrence Tribe was alleged to have rushed a partially plagiarized manuscript to print in the aid of a campaign to block the Senate confirmation of Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork.

intangible and ephemeral. The one who is so bold as to seek to comprehend that which cannot be re-lived will need above all: passion, imagination, empathy, judgement, and integrity. The work of the historian is a calling to serve humanity. Seeking to explain the human condition through the lived experiences of those who have made the complete journey of life is one of the more noble paths a person can take in life. The goal of the craft is not to inflate the ego. Conversely, we should be humbled. It is a great enough privilege to be able to uncover what meaning there was in lives lived before our own.