

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

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 ar

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.

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

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 sifting 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 he has a document in an archive that says “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.

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.

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.