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History in the Making

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This book raises the intriguing question of genre. The history discipline admits a variety ? not just academic forms (such as the learned article, the monograph, the edited collection), but also textbooks on the nature of history, student guides to historical skills and types of history, not to mention the theory of history, here dismissed in a sentence (p. xi). *History in the Making* exemplifies a further genre, the retrospective summation: an eminent, ?*practising* historian? ?explores some of the themes and problems addressed by historians? (p. ix) in the last 60 years or so. This prospect raises expectations. In this account of ?science as a vocation? would the historian assert the intellectual honesty of, but also the indispensable need for, value-free science in a society ideologically contaminated?(1) Exemplifying ?science as personal experience?, would it foster a new kind of responsibility that in the interests of human survival, the precondition of history, could re-orientate technical expertise and disciplinary organization, not least the technical expertise operative in history, itself an information-management technology, now reliant more than ever on information technology?(2)

However, *History in the Making*, a memoir both ?impersonal and personal?, observes the disciplinary limits. It takes history as what it is and what it has become. The personal is a metonym for the historical: the historical refracted through the personal produces the spectrum of interests displayed here. It expresses, ?in

the light of my personal experience, views on the practice of history as it has developed over the course of my professional life?; the author surveys ?changes in approaches to the past [...] most closely related to my own particular interests? (pp. ix, 215). The grammar of the first person thus coordinates the author?s day-to-day self with the ?general self? of the historian.(3) *History in the Making* shows the development of an historian?s professional interests mirroring emerging trends in historiography in ?the second half of the twentieth century and the opening years of the twenty-first? (p. ix). The historian makes history by historically contextualizing himself and his work: his memoir defines itself as a historical document ?representative of the last generation of pre-digital historians? and, therefore, possibly ?of some historical interest, if only as a record? (p. xi).

History is made as initial professional interests extend into the already available or emergent disciplinary or sub-disciplinary moulds in which historical practice is cast. Research into 17th-century Catalonia under the Castilian rule of Philip IV and his advisor, the Count-Duke of Olivares (chapter one), proceeds to raise issues about ?national and transnational history? (chapter two), biography as a form of political history (chapter three), and, given Spain?s loss of its empire, the perception or reality ? terms not mutually exclusive ? of decline in both history and historiography (chapter four). It also prompts excursions into the documentary value of art and culture (chapter five), the scope and limitations of comparative history (chapter six), and, finally, the historiographical opportunities in a modernized, globalized world where communication networks suggest historical networks, culminating here in those captured by Atlantic history (chapter seven). Thus a historicizing practice that began with a Spanish region becomes a global concern. This is certainly history in the making, history making more of itself, amplifying itself. Historians will surely find this overview of recent historiographical developments useful. But, hardly unfamiliar with the concept of *mentalité*, it leaves unmentioned the cognitive practice that enables history to be made at all. This practice manifests itself in a ?thought-style? or ?ideas style? automatically attuned to history as something the historian makes.(4) What makes this memoir valuable, even illuminating, is that it unselfconsciously illustrates this historicizing mentality and its tropes.

History in the Making illustrates the comprehensive discourse of the humanities in general, but particularly of history, the most comprehensive category. ?It is understanding?, the author says, ?that lies at the heart of the historical enterprise?; the ?immense change? the historical profession has witnessed in the past six decades ?has led to a vast enrichment of understanding of history and of the historical process itself? (pp. x, 218). But comprehension is ?only? a thought-style because it represents an aspiration to comprehensiveness its users know is unachievable. As the author says: ?No narrative is ever fully comprehensive, no explanation total? (p.94). Because total explanation is unachievable, history's discursive structure facilitates the next best thing, *amplificatio*, the self-amplification of knowledge, a basic trope of historicized thought.

It requires (first) the lexicon of plenitude. It is often indicated by essentially redundant adjectives and adverbs often in the comparative form. The author aims to achieve ?a *full* understanding? of events and issues (pp. 18, 57, 139); to explore ?in *greater* depth? economic tensions in Catalonia (p. 48); to secure a ?*better* understanding? be it of the societies of early modern Europe, be it of the career of the Count-Duke (pp. 80, 184). Nothing could be styled more comprehensively than recognizing that the Industrial Revolution ?can only be *fully* understood if it is placed in a global context and treated on a global scale? (p. 213), while history itself is a ?collective enterprise [...] committed to achieving a *better* appreciation both of the world that is gone and of the world as we know it today? (p. 217).

It involves (second) the recourse to catachresis. In conjoining opposites ? typically ?soft? aesthetic qualities with ?hard? disciplinary demands ? it styles comprehension as all-inclusiveness. But, distorted through their context, the words neutralize each other, their precise co-function left obscure. Typically historians? ?high *standards?* in exploring the past result from their ?ability to enter *imaginatively* into the life of a society remote in time? (p. xi); ?*imaginative* and *intuitive* sense [...] is so important for the *historical reconstruction* of past societies? (p. 15); ?I sought to reconcile my *natural sympathy* for an oppressed people with [...] my *duty* as a historian? (p. 43). They face a constant challenge: ?to get *inside the subject*?s skin and yet *maintain objectivity*? (p. 97). Ultimately ?*imagination*, *empathy*, the *ability* to master a wide range of diverse kinds of evidence? are required to relate political actors ?convincingly? to ?their *social*, *conceptual* and *political*

world?; but nothing explains just how they are ?brought into play?, as the author insists (p. 113).

It sustains (third) the prevalence of self-cancelling antitheses. These signify comprehension by implying that nothing is excluded. Their effect though is to produce redundancy, since their self-cancellation also cancels the already unexceptionable point they were making. Some examples are: ?a historian has advantages as well as disadvantages? in studying a society not his own (but to which occupation does this not apply?) (p. 30); Spanish history ?is made up of striking successes and equally striking failures? (but to which European country does this not apply either?) (p. 39); like ?a revisionist approach to national history?, ?the combined work of cultural and art historians? has involved ?losses as well as gains? (but what does not?) (pp. 49, 164). What precise sense can be made of the assertion that though the ?line between popular and élite culture [...] seems to have grown stronger with the passage of time, it was also porous with different worlds [...] overlapping? (what exactly is a ?strong, porous line??) (p.163)? What further alternative remains on learning that ?decline may be relative or [...] absolute, or some combination of the two? (p. 133), or that ?fluidity may have been a characteristic of the Atlantic world for much of its history [...], but so also [...] was stasis? (p. 209), or that differing approaches can ?yield a synthesis in which the particular and the general blend? (p. 198)?

To diversify and maximize the scope of historical cognition, there is (fourth) the recourse to a compendious nominalism that facilitates comparisons and analogies, such as ?unity and diversity?, or ?centre and periphery? permitting parallels between Franco and Olivares (pp. 26?7); the ?continuous interplay? between ?continuity [...] and change?, between ?the individual and his or her environment? or between ?perception and reality? (pp. 59, 93, 134); the ?persistent tension between similarity and difference? (pp.176, 194); or ?loss of empire? connecting Philip IV?s Spain with Attlee?s Britain (p. 11); or ?revolutions? offering ?rich opportunities for comparisons? (p. 172).

The same intention produces (fifth) atomization, the hallmark of comprehensive discourse. Here this means the discipline grows ?specialist fields and sub-fields? (p. 140), such as trans-national history, early modern history, comparative history, *histoire croisée*, micro-history, global history, Atlantic history, imperial history, many ramifying further into disciplines such as art history, sociology, and anthropology. It also multiplies the subject matter, thus de-materializing the objective past. There is, accordingly, in Atlantic history not one Atlantic Ocean but ?several Atlantics?, ?a number of Atlantics?, Spanish, Portuguese, English, Dutch, and French, depending on the route across (p. 205).

Conversely, comprehension triggers (sixth) the anxiety of omission, expressed in terms of performative failure. If the author?s research topic offers an ?open field? he can explore, he is also alert to any ?gap that somehow needs to be filled?, to any ?inadequacy of [...] approach?, to ?paths not taken or forgotten?, to what is ?dated? or ?increasingly anachronistic?, to ?a period seriously understudied? (pp. 7, 23, 73, 79, 81, 85, 91, 94, 101). But this failure also produces redundancy: the assertion that ?all attempts at historical periodization are [...] unsatisfactory because no single term can [...] encapsulate [...] an epoch as a *whole?* is a truism since ?period? and ?epoch? are synonyms (p. 60); the observation that ?to make sense of the contemporary world is a [...] part of the historical enterprise, but it is not the *whole* part [...]? collapses in self-contradiction: how can a part be whole (p. 214)?

History in the Making relies unsurprisingly on a stabilizing, dualistic conception of knowledge: the subject (the impartial historian) confronts its object (the past as it was). This naïve dualism is philosophically questionable. Still historiography needs the past as it was. In any case, the validity of dualism is not the issue here, but its function in comprehensive discourse. Historical practice proves unable to sustain it. It makes both subject and object indeterminate, thereby compromising its cognitive structure.

So (seventh) the knowing subject, seeking ever fuller comprehension, destabilizes itself. The reason is: its cognitive scope keeps expanding, discovering ?quite new perspectives? (p. 100). The narrative is articulated through such self-correcting phrases as: ?I had become aware, however, that I had entered sensitive territory [...]?; ?my [...] researches and [...] travels brought home to me [...]?; ?As I came to appreciate [...]?; ?As I came to see [...]?; ?I became increasingly aware of the inadequacy of this approach [...]?; ?I would at least

get a *clearer* sense [...]?; ?it became clear to me [...]?; ?as I came to know *more* [...], I came to realize [...]?; ?I was not as aware [...] as I later became [...]? (pp. 20, 26, 30, 56, 57, 73, 96, 99, 129, 134). Consequently, its cognitive stance also fluctuates, especially according to the ?lens? it uses (p. 60). The author can be both ?deeply immersed in my subject? and ?a genuine outsider?; yet he approaches his assignment ?from the standpoint of the new, post-Second World War generation? (pp. 19, 29). Now he advocates ?a clear-sighted approach, based on all the available evidence?; now he ?wants to see [the New World] through the eyes of sixteenth-century Spaniards? (pp. 47, 202). He knows there are areas ?he might otherwise have neglected to explore? and problems he ?might otherwise have side-stepped?; but he sees the value of exploring the palace of the Buen Retiro ?from a variety of viewpoints, and from treating its history in the round? (pp. 86, 141, 214). While different disciplinary perspectives produce ambivalence, offering now ?enrichment?, now ?distraction?, they can also converge in ?an integrated approach? from which ?much can be gained? (pp. 100, 153).

So too (eighth), the structures in historical practice that make the objective past comprehensible effectively de-materialize it. ?The attempt to pin down the past? may be ?an elusive enterprise?, yet in the archive the author is in ?real touch? and ?direct contact? with it (pp. xi, 13, 14). ?Past and present? can be ?inextricably entangled?, have a legitimate ?interconnected nature?, but ?constantly, and sometimes unexpectedly, interact? as well (pp. 25, 80, 115). Though ?the study of networks, connections and interacting systems has become a key to unlocking the past?, the past, somehow already at liberty, has still ?an uncanny way of coming back to upset the present? (pp. 211, 215). Though, unfortunately, ?every nation views its past through the prism of the present and its present through the prism of the past?, the historian is urged to ?enter imaginatively into the past while maintaining one foot in the present, and always be alert to new ways of approaching it? (pp. 44, 215).

This multiplicity of inconsistent subject-perspectives and contradictory object-positions, characteristic of *amplificatio*, might make sense if it had a synthesizing, logical structure. It might not encapsulate comprehensive knowledge, but it would still evince total rationalization. But precisely here this memoir is most ambivalent. While repudiating ?strong? forms of historicism, the ?deterministic?, ?mechanistic?, ?general laws? of history proposed by Marx, Spengler, Toynbee, Braudel or Elias (pp. 9, 93, 121-3, 151,170) it can still mobilize the no less weak historicist features inherent in the comprehensive thought-style itself. In terms of *res gestae*, it can attribute a ?direction? to history, identify the ?trends of the times?, or pre-conceive national history as ?teleological? (pp. 51, 53, 87). Further, suggesting a commercial analogy, it can define history as ?enrichment?, as an ?enterprise? (pp. xii, 47, 67, 137, 217). It can also represent the ?continuity of the enterprise over the generations? by analogy to ?seeds once sown, [that] may lie dormant for a while before sprouting?, thereby invoking the irrational, organic conception of history typical of conservative-ideological historicist thinking (pp. 67-8).(5) Not least the author defines himself in historicist terms as ?a representative of the last *generation* of pre-digital historians? or as belonging to ?the new, post-Second World War *generation*? (pp. xi, 29.(6) Similarly his work defines itself by its macro-historical focus on ?outstanding?, world-historical individuals like Olivares or Bolivar who can ?shape? their period rather than by any micro-historical frequentation with the *hoi polloi* possibly not ?truly representative? of it (pp. 162,193).

Otherwise the historicist infra-structure is relocated to historiography, to historical practice. ?General laws? of history may not exist, but sententious precepts, scholastic words of command affirming the historian?s custodial responsibility for the past, still guide history?s making, *inter alia*: ?Historians *should be* as much concerned with the present as with the past?; ?contingency [...] *should never be* left out of account in the [...] explanation of the past?; ?to compare and connect are, and *should be* treated as, two sides of a single coin?; ?an anthropological dissection of court rituals [...] *can all too easily* result in a static picture of the past?; ?while empathy is an essential part [...] of biography, empathy *can all too easily* slide into unwary sympathy?; ?the search for causes of decline [...] *can all too easily* assume the characteristics of a historical parlour game [...]? (pp. 25, 93, 97, 183; 109,119; cf. pp.51,173,181-2, 212). Discursive coherence relies on categorical coordinators ? like the figures of sufficient reason, instruments of comprehension already mentioned ? such as: ?traditions? (pp. 29, 124, 170), ?transition? (p. 63), ?trajectory? (p. 68), ?forces? both

?economic and social? and ?great impersonal? (pp. 65, 93), ?pressure both from above and below? (p. 77), ?turning-points? (p. 98) ?process? both ?historical? and ?complex? (pp. x, 61), ?evolution? (p. 51), as well as the redundancy, ?continuous process of evolution? (p. 79). But, above all, the imperative to contextualize pre-supposes a sense of history embedded in past events themselves, ? as in placing Spain?s past ?in a wider European context?; or setting the Catalan revolt ?within a coherent narrative framework?, ?documents into their historical context?, decline ?in a larger historiographical context?, or ?two colonial worlds *firmly* in the context of their own time?; while ?the history of Spain [...] stands *squarely* within this master-narrative of [...] rise and decline? (pp. 36, 48, 84-5, 118, 119, 188; cf. pp.124, 137, 139). A sophistical strategy, nevertheless: it perpetrates a ?vicious bifurcation? of reality, since contexts project prioritized structures of sense abstracted originally from the very objects they subsequently frame.(8)

In conclusion, *History in the Making* demonstrates history compulsively historicizing itself, historiography itself being determined by history. This determination takes several different forms. The author is naturally dismayed to discover that important archive material had disappeared in fires in 1794 and 1795 or that the splendid Buen Retiro palace had been largely destroyed in the Napoleonic Wars (pp. 16, 143). Then the author historicizes himself: by the generation he belongs to; by providing this memoir, this ?record? of historical practice in the late twentieth-century; by reference to his immediate experience such as undertaking research during the Franco régime (which ?sensitive territory? still gave him a ?privileged position? compared with his Spanish colleagues (pp. 20, 23, 41)) or reflecting on the decline of imperial influence as represented by the Suez Crisis (p. 117); but also, most recently, by assessing the implications for historiography of the growth of information technology and of economic and cultural globalization (p. 243). The author also becomes an historical actor: his works on Spanish history contribute to national self-reorientation, particularly to the affirmation of Catalan identity, following the end of the Franco period (p. 30); his interest in the Buen Retiro, fortuitously an act of ?reparation? for an ancestor?s involvement in its destruction, influences contemporary Spanish cultural politics regarding its restoration (pp. 143, 167). In the end *History in the Making* leaves a paradoxical impression. No matter if history?s comprehensive thought-style is questionable: the historian?s interests need only shape his historical practice for historical practice to shape history in its own self-interest.

Notes

NB. Italicizations in the text are my own (MLD).

1. See Max Weber, ?Wissenschaft als Beruf,? in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. J. Winckelmann (7th ed., Tübingen 1988), pp. 582?613, p. 613.Back to (1)
2. cf. Hans Jonas, *Wissenschaft als persönliches Erlebnis* (Göttingen 1987), pp. 28?31.Back to (2)
3. Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik*, ed. P. Leyh (Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt, 1977), pp. 365?6.Back to (3)
4. cf. Ludwik Fleck, *Erfahrung und Tatsache. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. L. Schäfer & T. Schnelle (Frankfurt am Main, 1983); Julien Benda, *Du Style d?idées. Réflexions sur la pensée* (Paris, 1948). Back to (4)
5. Karl Mannheim, *Ideologie und Utopie* (8th ed., Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1995), p.105, 202?3; *Konservatismus. Ein Beitrag zur Soziologie des Wissens*, ed. D. Kettler, et al. (Frankfurt am Main, 1984), pp. 151, 155?6.Back to (5)
6. See Karl Mannheim, ?The problem of generations?, in *Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. P. Kecskemeti (Abingdon, 2000), pp. 276?320.Back to (6)
7. See Karl Mannheim, ?On the interpretation of ?Weltanschauung??, in *op.cit.*, pp.33?83.Back to (7)
8. See Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge 1920), pp. 30?1, 44?5, 185.Back to (8)

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