However Imperceptibly: From the Historical to the Sublime

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ABOUT THIRTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, MY PROFESSOR IN A COURSE ON SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH SOCIAL HISTORY BEGAN with the following. "You may have heard," he said, "that the reading list for this course has not changed since I took it here in 1924." Here he paused. "But I can assure you that it has changed"—he paused again, and added, sotto voce—"however imperceptibly." These words have long seemed emblematic for me of the pride felt by much of the historical profession in the continuity of its essential practices. I do not mean, of course, that historians have not embraced new groups of people, adopted a much wider array of ideological stances, and above all invented a researchable historicity for many things that had never before seemed to have a history. All this innovation is splendid, and the finest products of academic history constitute a rich and admirable body of work. But in the essential practices, especially the practice of reading—the basic relation of reader with language and imagination—change is, shall we say, hardly perceptible. It seems that the charge that historians are professionally taught *not* to read is almost as true now as it was two decades ago when Dominick LaCapra made it (339). But if we are to learn about the historical imagination, histories need to be read and academic historians need to be reminded from time to time that what they do is as subject to the formative pressures of discourse as any other precinct of the world of words.

My task this morning, at least as I construe it, is to discuss developments of the historical imagination among academic historians. As always, this is a tale of anxiety and conflict, in which movement comes slowly when it comes and conservative ways reign supreme. Any discipline, perhaps, is slow to change; this is the meaning of discipline, after all.

We read these days a lot about the return of beauty, with citations of work by Elaine Scarry or Wendy Steiner or of films or art exhibits and the like heralding "the end of modernism," the basic impulse of which, according to Barnett Newman (in 1948), was "the desire to destroy beauty" (qtd. in Scott). What is interesting about the pro-beauty hype (aside from the notion that beauty needs to be hyped at all to sophisticates) is the absence of aesthetic perspective. Beauty's contrary here is ugliness, the

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choices between them are clear, and never the twain shall meet. Yet for well over two centuries the contrary of the beautiful has not been the ugly (which is, after all, in the eye of the beholder) but rather the sublime. And who does not know that the invocation of the sublime by Jean-François Lyotard inaugurated the great outpouring of discourse considering the postmodern condition?

This is not the place to review the Kantian sublime in any detail. It is found in the imagination rather than in the thing imagined. The imagination perceives things as a whole but in a formless state, boundless and exceeding limits. It refuses the principle of purposefulness in presenting a chaos, disorder, or desolation (Kant 82–84). The beautiful is the symbol of the morally good (198), while the sublime disrupts our vital powers only to make them stronger later. In extending the sublime to history, Friedrich von Schiller scorned any view of the past that made it orderly, rational, explicable, and satisfyingly meaningful. The "bizarre savagery" exceeded our comprehension (205). It would not do to imagine the past by domesticating it.

As the sublime became a dominant aesthetic principle of Romantic art in general, one discourse painfully and gradually withdrew from its place in the realm of art. I refer to historical studies, which "desublimated" itself, turning to beautification to fill the logically designated slot in the order of words as the antiliterature, the proponent of the real as against the possible, of experience against fantasy. My point, to be brief, is that academic history has been wed to the beautiful, punishing departures from it and—in good Kantian fashion—proclaiming that beautification alone represents the high moral ground, a truly humane and responsible attitude.

By beautification I do not mean a flight from ugliness. The last two centuries offer as much horror, atrocity, indecency, and strife as any other period, and historians have addressed these matters as fully as they could, withholding no unpleasantness. The goal, however, in presenting the ugly as well as the peaceable and benign has been to explain, to find an argumentative form, typically a narrative, that will figure forth and enshrine a meaning for these happenings beyond their mere meaningless happening. If the happenings were meaningless (that is, absurd or terrifying, depending on your point of view) or if they escaped any possible form that could be devised professionally, history would be a failure. Kant hoped that human history was meaningful, and he wrote that we should live as if it were so. Hegel was convinced that we are part of a rational story, however we behave.

Desublimation resulted, prompted by the anxieties brought on by two revolutions: the political revolution of the late eighteenth century and a rhetorical revolution that swept away all the neoclassical figures of proportion, limits, and boundaries (Punter 25).

History has absorbed and developed these old anxieties. The anxieties provoked by current discourse have changed since I described them twenty years ago as "triangular" (267–93). Then the pulls among the three points of the social, the psychological, and the discursive created a dynamic situation. The culture wars that followed, however, quickly seized on the discursive point of the triangle as the enemy, which was soon labeled postmodernism, however inappropriately. To discuss the historical text in almost any way was—indeed, still is—to champion anarchy, to mock truth, and to agitate for a situation in which anything could be said of the past, provided it was said obscurely enough. Of the many examples I could cite, the work of George Iggers seems appropriate here:

> But plausibility obviously rests not on the arbitrary invention of an historical account but involves rational strategies of determining what in fact is plausible. It assumes that the historical account relates to a historical reality, no matter how complex and indirect the process is by which the historian approximates this reality. Thus, although many historians have taken contemporary linguistic, semiotic, and literary theory seriously, they have in practice not accepted the idea that the texts with which they

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> work have no reference to reality. To be sure every historical account is a construct, but a construct arising from a dialog between the historian and the past, one that does not occur in a vacuum but within a community of inquiring minds who share criteria of plausibility. (145)

These sentences express perfectly the paradox faced by thoughtful scholars like Iggers. On the one hand, he mercilessly castigates Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit, and, I confess, me for all kinds of assaults on truth and reality. On the other, he relies on adverbial assertion to defend his rationalist account of what is plausible. The "obviously" has no basis in a book that attempts to characterize the ideas of people for whom the account is not obvious. But Iggers knows this and soon must admit that his criteria are obvious only "within a community of inquiring minds who share criteria of plausibility." Stanley Fish could not have put more directly that truth and reality exist only in communities. As it happens, White, Ankersmit, and I have lived in such communities throughout our professional lives; I think we share the criteria of plausibility. This does not mean, however, that we do not also sense that there is something outside the community. This outside beckons right now. It is the historical sublime.

In her recent book *Imperfect Histories*, Ann Rigney writes:

> In my argument, the aesthetic effect particular to historical representation derives precisely from the realization that there is so much of the past beyond the historical text that is still unknown, and that understanding the past as a whole is an almost unimaginably complex enterprise. It follows from this that the more historians meet the resistance of their material by going as far as they can into its complexity, and the more they can express this resistance, the greater the aesthetic appeal of their work. When it comes to this effect, novelists with their fragmented-manuscripts-found-in-a-cupboard, their fabricated ellipses, and their disingenuous questions about imaginary events can at most try to imitate the historians whose work is defamiliarizing by default. The most appropriate term for describing this particular aesthetic effect is still the "sublime." (114–15)

Rigney writes about the Romantic sublime, the historical imagination of Walter Scott and Thomas Carlyle, in the era before what White has called the "desublimation" that made history a disciplined activity (58–82). But I want to suggest today that even the most professional of academic histories can stimulate the reflectiveness of the sublime, however imperceptible it may seem to be.

The best way to illustrate the phenomenon of the historical sublime is through comparative example. Certainly the Romantic era that Rigney studied is rich in literary and historical versions of the historical sublime. Yet to register the development of the historical imagination, we must look at current historical production, academic history; if we cannot locate the sublime in professional historical work, then the desublimation remains complete. But I think that we can. In fact, I would like to use as an exemplar of the historical sublime a historian Iggers cites with approval against White.

Christopher Browning's book *Ordinary Men*: *Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1992) details the experiences of a group of middle-aged policemen from Hamburg who were placed in a special unit of the German Order Police and sent to Poland, where they were involved in atrocities. This book and this historian have received much acclaim—deserved, in my opinion—which has focused on the quality of Browning's research, his delving into previously untapped archives, and the clarity of his storytelling. But the title reveals another aspect of the work, a theme that escapes the limits of what actually happened. It is the observation that the killers described in the book are not purely historical phenomena, bound to their time, but are rather no different from most readers of the book, who thus become in a sense part of the book. Browning writes:

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> The behavior of any human being is, of course, a very complex phenomenon, and the historian who attempts to "explain" it is indulging in a certain arrogance. . . . This story of ordinary men is not the story of all men. The reserve policemen faced choices, and most of them committed terrible deeds. But those who killed cannot be absolved by the notion that anyone in the same situation would have done as they did. For even among them, some refused to kill and others stopped killing. Human responsibility is ultimately an individual matter.
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> At the same time, however, the collective behavior of Reserve Police Battalion 101 has deeply disturbing implications. There are many societies afflicted by traditions of racism and caught in the siege mentality of war or threat of war. Everywhere society conditions people to respect and defer to authority, and indeed could scarcely function otherwise. Everywhere people seek career advancement. In every modern society, the complexity of life and the resulting bureaucratization and specialization attenuate the sense of personal responsibility of those implementing official policy. Within virtually every social collective, the peer group exerts tremendous pressures on behavior and sets moral norms. If the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?
>
> (188–89)

This passage is more than a banal "there but for the grace of God go I" turn, although that turn has a power to it; rather, it is a carefully reasoned discussion of the responses of individual men. Compare Browning's work with Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. Goldhagen's much discussed work amasses a vast pile of evidence for a single, simple theme—that "eliminationist antisemitism" pervaded the German consciousness, which was unique:

> No other country's antisemitism was at once so widespread as to have been a cultural axiom, was so firmly wedded to racism, had as its foundation such a pernicious image of Jews that deemed them to be a mortal threat to the Volk, and was so deadly in content, producing, even in the nineteenth century, such frequent and explicit calls for the extermination of the Jews, calls which expressed the logic of the racist eliminationist antisemitism that prevailed in Germany. The unmatched volume and the vitriolic and murderous substance of German antisemitic literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries alone indicate that German antisemitism was *sui generis*. (419)

As if to remind us of why this beautification has its status, Goldhagen proceeds to say, "This is a specifically historical explanation . . ." (420). Indeed it is, but not only for the reasons he implies. His argument is historical—in his view, at least—precisely because it is the product of a reflection that draws a clear line between reader and subject. The effect of Goldhagen's meaning is comforting: It can't happen here.

The contrast between Browning and Goldhagen carries over into their specific accounts of atrocities. Goldhagen tells the story of the deadly long-distance death march in 1945 from the Helmbrechts satellite camp for women. Hegel is an important figure here—Helga Hegel, that is, who became the head woman guard through her intimacy with the camp commander. The Jewish women were starving on the march, but Hegel recounts, "I never once procured additional meals for the women, although it would have been in my power to do so" (349).

She also offers a more general view of the situation: "Duerr [sic] never gave the command that no one was to be shot although he had the power to do so. I do not know the exact number that were shot every day but to my knowledge it was an average of six to ten every day. These women were shot simply because they were too weak to go on—they committed no crime whatsoever" (352). The explanation for the sangfroid shown by Hegel and the rest is made clear everywhere in the book but nowhere more pointedly than in its last line. Goldhagen writes, "The camp world reveals the essence of the Germany that gave itself to Nazism, no less than the perpetrators reveal the slaughter and barbarism the

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ordinary Germans were willing to perpetrate in order to save Germany and the German people from the ultimate danger—DER JUDE" (461).

Browning, on the contrary, finds no essence in what Goldhagen calls the Germany that gave itself to Nazism. He writes:

> What is clear is that the men's concern for their standing in the eyes of their comrades was not matched by any sense of human ties with their victims. The Jews stood outside their circle of human obligation and responsibility. Such a polarization between "us" and "them," between one's comrades and the enemy, is of course standard in war.
>
> It would seem that even if the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 had not consciously adopted the anti-Semitic doctrines of the regime, they had at least accepted the assimilation of the Jews into the image of the enemy. (73)

Instead of showing us a monstrous Helga Hegel, Browning tells of the "strange health of Captain Hoffmann," whose medical problems (stomach cramps), which occurred before actions against Jews, brought on the scorn of his men. At the time, Hoffmann attributed this "vegetative colitis" to a dysentery vaccine. In 1960, however, when he was interrogated about his actions, he claimed "psychological stress" from the massacre at Josefow (117). Browning's conclusion:

> Certainly, Hoffmann's duties aggravated his condition. Moreover, it is clear that rather than using his illness to escape an assignment that involved killing the Jews of Poland, Hoffmann made every effort to hide it from his superiors and to avoid being hospitalized. If mass murder was giving Hoffmann stomach pains, it was a fact that he was deeply ashamed of and sought to overcome to the best of his ability. (120)

We have, in other words, a divided Captain Hoffmann. One, we might say, is the body, unsocialized, resistant to peer pressure, going its own way. The other, the Captain Hoffmann that can be explained, often feels shame before his men because the community is supreme. Goldhagen's Hegel feels no such division, because she is completely explained. The beauty of her historical form is her moral ugliness in our eyes, if not in her own. Hoffmann's complexities resist explanation.

So what do we learn from identifying the sublime in these very academic histories? First, perhaps most important, we see that this category of the historical imagination is not reserved for Romantics like Carlyle or Jules Michelet or for novelists from Scott to the authors of our current postmodern historical metanarratives. To be sure, in these works the historical sublime is most notably foregrounded and consequently most easily studied. Yet it would be a sterile aesthetic concept, and our readerly powers of observation would be impotent, if we could not locate the sublime where it is least perceptible, in academic history.

At the same time, this awareness of the sublime lurking in accounts by contemporary academic historians may bring us a bit closer to the situation that obtained before the desublimation of history in the nineteenth century. As Lionel Gossman described it in a classic essay, "What was important was not the truth of the narrative so much as the activity of reflecting about the narrative, including that of reflecting about its truth" (244). The historical reader was at the center of the process of imagining history; that process was not dominated by a beautifying discourse, in which truth (or rather plausibility) was determined by resemblance to other discourses. There was an outside to imagining history, and that outside was our awareness of our own existence as historical beings. In my view, the historical sublime makes its mark here. To recognize that nothing about ourselves, including the conceptual tools with which we perceive and reflect on the past and our relation to it, exists separate from a changing flow of pressures creates in us, if only for a moment, the chaos, disorder, and desolation that Kant prescribed. Far from certifying any historical understanding, this realization calls it all into doubt. This doubt is also part of our position in history. It need not be paralyzing, sapping our vital powers. We return to ourselves

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more convinced that progress exists, that humanity is improving, and we act on our beliefs in the absurd but vital confidence that this is so.

A third factor here points to a broader and more significant issue than the role of the historical reader. It was alluded to by Sande Cohen. At the 2001 meeting of the American Historical Association, Cohen called for a reconception of the concept of the event, which he takes to be the sort of prenamed, pretold, and preunderstood package of reality that blocks any true inquiry into the past. (Perhaps the past itself is such a concept.) In Cohen's view, we always confront the past in full confidence that we know what actually happened, and this confidence leads to the passive nihilism of our historical culture. What is required is a sense of happening that will put aside (or bracket) the narratives that we all know when we approach the event. I think that a better concept for the sort of open, unfamiliar past that Cohen wants to imagine is Giorgio Agamben's *whatever* (1–2). Real reflection might be possible before a whatever past, because the beautification by explanation would be the problem, not the solution.

I do not wish to imply that I think one historian and not another is correct. Or, rather, I do not wish to imply that I think one historian is correct on grounds that are not aesthetic. Our choice of one account over the other will, in my view, be based largely on a preexisting tendency toward a view of the past that is either beautiful or sublime. At this point, the terms begin to sound crude, even beautifying, as binaries tend to be. Both Browning and Goldhagen have produced richly documented, well-argued, professional works. Both books are eminently plausible.

There is a great deal more to be said about the historical sublime, and no time here to say it. What it figures forth is a certain reader with a certain way of "imaging history." Faced with such readers, even academic history may change, however imperceptibly.

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