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The Elusiveness of History

HISTORY is elusive. The word itself is as elusive as the things that it means.

The original Greek word "historia" meant "an inquiry." It could mean an inquiry about anything in the world, but it came to have the particular meaning of an inquiry into human affairs, and this in a limited usage of these two words. Human nature has a physical aspect, but the word history has never been used to mean the study of the human body. Sciences like anatomy, neurology, physiology, and biology have been excluded from the word "history's" empire. "History" has been restricted to meaning the study of the experiences and actions of human personalities. One might have thought that the word had now been pinned down, but it had not been, after all; for it had no sooner been confined within these limits than it burst its bounds by acquiring an alternative usage. It now came to mean human actions and experiences themselves, besides meaning the study of them, and it went on to widen its meaning still further.

One feature of human experiences and actions is that they are events on the move down a one-way stream of time. But human affairs are not the only things, known to human observers, that move through time along an irreversible course. So history came to mean all movement of this irreversible kind. The Earth's non-human fauna could have a history, its flora could have a history, the solar system could have a history, the whole cosmos could have a history; history need not be something that happened just to mankind or to individual human beings. A thing is in history when it is

moving along a time-track on which it cannot turn back; and our modern men of science seem to think that most things in the universe move in this "historical" way, in contrast to Aristotle's view that all the heavenly bodies—from the moon inclusive, outwards, measuring from the Earth as the centre point—move in circular orbits in which each circumgyration is an exact repetition of every one that has preceded it.

So the word "history" has a whole gamut of meanings, and the two extremes seem far apart. At one end history means the study of human affairs, at the other end it means, not a study, but a movement which, so long as it is an irreversible movement down a time-stream, may be a movement of anything in the world.

Is there anything in common between the "subjective" history which is a historian's observation and record and the "objective" history which is the movement that the historian is trying to track down? Well, yes, there is. In the first place, "objective history" and "subjective history" are inseparable. Without an object there can be no inquiry, and, without an inquirer, there can be no object—or, at least, no object can be known to human minds except through some inquirer's observation of it. In the second place, the subject of an historical inquiry is, at the same time, part and parcel of the object that he is studying; for the historian himself, as well as the people or the things that he is observing, is afloat on the stream of time and is all the time being carried, like them, down time's irreversible current.

This double role of the historian is obvious in the case of, say, Thucydides, who was a combatant in the Great Atheno-Peloponnesian war before he became the great historian of it. Thucydides might never have had a chance of writing his history if he had not had the misfortune to fail in a naval operation in which he was in command on the Athenian side. His countrymen vented their spleen at his failure to save Amphipolis from falling by sending the unfortunate naval commander into exile, and it was in this undesired retreat from public life that Thucydides found the leisure to research and write and the opportunity to address historical inquiries to participants in the war on both sides of the military front. As an historian, Thucydides has given an account of the unsuccessful naval operation that he himself had conducted as a naval officer, and, in this case, no reader can fail to see that the officer-historian has run with the hare besides hunting with the hounds. Thucydides is both object and subject in the history of the naval episode on the River Strymon in the year 424 B.C. But every historian is, like Thucydides, inside the history that he is observing and recording; for, even when an historian is not writing the history of his own time and place, he is writing about human affairs that have happened at some date at some point on the surface of this planet; and he, like the people into whose actions and experiences he is inquiring, is a human being living in the habitable world.

Every historian, in fact, is charting some previous movement down some higher reach of the river on which he himself is being carried; and, though the particular past epoch that he is studying may be relatively near to, or relatively remote from, his own time, this difference is a minor one. In every case, the historian and his objects of study are being carried down the same river by the same current. It will be seen that the historian is in the same plight as the astronomer. Both astronomers and historians have sometimes naïvely assumed that they were observing the movements of stars or people from some fixed point on the bank of time's ever-rolling stream. But an observer in this commanding position would not be part of the human fauna of the Earth;

he would be God himself; and no historian or astronomer will have the hardihood to maintain that he commands this God's-eye view. He knows very well that he is caught inextricably in the meshes of relativity. The only view of space-time that he can ever have is one taken from some local and temporary point-moment inside the system that he is trying to observe.

THE historian's view is conditioned, always and everywhere, by his own location in time and place; and, since place and time are continually changing, no history, in the subjective sense of the word, can ever be a permanent record that will tell the story, once for all, in a form that will be equally acceptable to readers in all ages, or even in all quarters of the Earth.

This is why in our Western world, in each successive generation for the last six or seven generations or so, our historians have rewritten the history of the Greeks and Romans. It is not that the Greeks and Romans themselves have changed; they cannot have changed, since they are still just as dead in 1954 as they were in 1854; but, though persistently dead, the Greeks and Romans are never "done with"; each successive generation of their modern successors finds itself still full of curiosity about them, and, since each of these modern generations has been, in its turn, alive and on the move, Greek and Roman history has taken on a different appearance when viewed from each passing modern generation's short-lived standpoint. From this or that point in the modern reach of the time-stream, this or that feature in Greek and Roman history looms up into prominence, while this or that other feature recedes into obscurity. In looking at the past, we cannot jump clear of our own experiences, actions, passions, and prejudices. These cannot (we may suppose) affect the always elusive past-in-itself; but they do decide which of the many possible alternative partial glimpses of the past shall be visible to us, just here and just now.

One of the greatest modern historians of Greece and Rome in the last generation was Michael Rostovtzeff, a "White" Russian exile who ended his days in the United States and wrote his two greatest works there. Rostovtzeff

has been taxed by some of his fellow historians with having read into the Roman Revolution in the 3rd century of the Christian Era some of his own experience of the Russian Revolution in and after 1917. This charge against this great mind may be not altogether unjustified, but all historians, including Rostovtzeff's accusers, come under the same verdict. There may be differences in the degree to which an historian's outlook is governed by the accident of his own location in time and space, but this is a servitude from which no historian can ever wholly escape.

If there were any province of the past which the historian could study without having his view of it influenced by his own experience in his own day, it might be expected to be found in the history of one of those early civilisations that have been unearthed by the modern archaeologist's spade after having lain buried and forgotten for hundreds or even thousands of years. Yet, even in our modern rediscovery of the history of Ancient Egypt, our judgement of the past can be affected by our present feelings. The heretical Pharaoh-philosopher Ikhnaton, who was so controversial a figure in his lifetime in the 14th century B.C., has, once again, aroused strong feelings, for him and against him, since his records were retrieved in the 1880's after an interval of perhaps 1,400 years during which there was no living memory of his existence. Western scholars in the 20th century of the Christian era, like Egyptian ecclesiastics and officials in the 14th century B.C., have taken sides, passionately, in the controversy over this ambivalently attractive/provocative personality.

THIS apparently inescapable subjectivity of our glimpses of even the more distant past makes the objective reality in the human, as well as the astronomical, universe very elusive. Is there any possibility of our observing past human affairs without warping the shape of the past in the very act of observation?

There is no possibility of wading out of the flowing stream of history and taking up a stationary position on the bank. The historian and the people whom he is observing are, alike, inevitably *en voyage* in the same irreversible

direction down the time-stream. Both parties are on the move; but this, in itself, is a human experience that they have in common. Both parties have the same human destiny and the same human nature; and this measure of uniformity in our human predicament makes it possible for us to enter into the thoughts, feelings, decisions, actions, and experience of other human beings by analogy with our own. Moreover, by analysing the likenesses and differences between ourselves and other human beings we can learn something about ourselves. We can discover some of our own peculiarities, our own particular slant or bias; and this is valuable; for, if we are right in believing that each one of us has a bias that is incorrigible, the next best thing to the impossible remedy of eliminating it is to know what it is and to make a clean breast of it to other people. The honest historian is the one who does not pretend to have no bias, but who does tell his reader what he thinks his bias is. Yet our intellectual limitations make it impossible for even a complete candour to be fully revealing. When an historian has informed his reader, without any reservations, of every bias of which the historian is aware in himself, the historian and the reader alike will still be victims of the bias of which the historian remains unaware—and this bias of which we are not conscious is often the most distorting bias of all.

Still, the uniformity of human nature does make it possible, in at least two senses, for us to break through the barrier of subjectivity that insulates one human soul from another. The human social animal does have some crucial personal experiences—for instance, birth, marriage, parenthood, and death—which make a uniform foundation of life below the almost infinitely variegated superstructure of superficial manners and customs; and these fundamental experiences are the themes of the greatest works of art. At a less deep level, too, the uniformity produces recurrences of mental and social situations that lend themselves to scientific study. In the sciences of psychology, logic, theory of knowledge, anthropology, sociology, and economics, certain aspects of human affairs can be dealt with by the human mind by those scientific methods that have been so successful

in Man's study of non-human nature. Yet there are also some experiences that are perhaps intrinsically unclassifiable and unpredictable. The most momentous events in life are the encounters between one personality and another. It is from these that all acts of creation seem to spring. Yet no one can ever foretell what the outcome of any such encounter is going to be.

So the uniformity of human nature is not an open sesame, and even human nature itself is not a permanent fixture in the universe. We know enough about its history to know that, compared to other forms of life, it is a very recent phenomenon on the surface of this planet, and we also know that, one day, it will disappear from the terrestrial scene. The same time-stream that has borne it into existence will eventually carry it away, and we have no knowledge of its existence on any other star. We know that, during all but a fraction of past time, the universe has had a history without human historians, and we can foresee that, during all but a fraction of time to come, it will have a history without human historians once again. Yet, though we can string these words together and put them into currency, a history without historians is really something incomprehensible and inconceivable to human minds.

Is there, then, anything truly permanent in the universe with which we human beings can have any kind of communion? This is a question with which the elusiveness of history is bound to confront us; but it is a question that points beyond time and therefore beyond history too. It points to Heaven (or Hell) for that half of mankind that lives by the Jewish tradition; and, for the other half, that lives by the Buddhist tradition, it points to Nirvana.

Both Nirvana and Heaven are conceptions of a reality outside history—a reality that is much more real than any merely historical reality can be. Have these conceptions of a transcendent reality any warrant in any experience that is accessible to human beings? Most human beings, in their ordinary experience of life, are confined to the time-stream as strictly as fish are confined to the water. Yet a few people have reported to the rest of us the experience of breaking out of time into an altogether different

dimension of spiritual existence. In terms of time, the duration of this experience may be almost infinitesimally brief; yet an experience which, if it had been still in the time-stream, might have occupied no more than a fraction of a moment, can be eternal in its own dimension, just because this dimension is right outside the flow of time.

Here we are out of history in the realm of religious experience; and this experience of eternity is reported, by all who have had it, to be a blissful one. But, while we still have Man's perennial hope of thus breaking out of history in an ecstasy, we are now also haunted by a fear of being deported out of history in our everyday life. We have seen that "objective" history is always elusive. The historian's most sincere attempts to grasp it are always partly baffled by the inescapable subjectiveness of his own point of view. Might not an omnipotent dictator, armed with new weapons of psychological technique, be able to cut his subjects off completely from all contact with the objective past? Might not he be able to impose on them a view of history that was wholly subjective, and in which the subjective point of view was, not theirs, but his? If this nightmare could be translated into reality in the interests of authoritarian government, a latter-day mankind would be reduced to the condition of its most primitive ancestors. It would be in history without having any knowledge of history; and this ignorance of history in a world whose living fauna included human beings would be still more weird than the earlier and later ignorance of history in a universe without any human inhabitants.

COULD this dictators' paradise ever become practical politics? Is it likely that mankind's view of history could be successfully conditioned to conform to the view that their rulers deemed politically expedient? The very suggestion that this might be possible makes us shudder, but, happily, there are at least two obstacles in real life to the achievement of any such diabolical design.

The first obstacle lies in the impossibility of keeping every living human soul psychologically conditioned simultaneously. It is perhaps

theoretically conceivable that all living human beings save one could be kept in a hypnotic trance, but this presupposes that at least one hypnotiser is in action; and, in order to hypnotise his fellow human beings, the hypnotiser himself must remain un hypnotised. But, if he is un hypnotised, he will be in the normal state of human freedom, and, if he is free, he cannot make himself proof against the possibility of his changing his mind one day and reversing his policy.

This comforting consideration has been set out by Sir Charles Darwin in *The Next Million Years*; but, long before we are driven back on this last line of defence against tyranny, we are likely to bring this arch-enemy of human freedom to a halt; for there is a wayward, contrary, ungovernable element in human nature—an element akin to the recalcitrancy of our cousins the camel, mule, and goat—which is the bane of dictators. No doubt we are, all of us, condi-

tioned, to some extent, by the traditional “culture-pattern” to which we have been moulded by the accident of the time and place of our birth; and different cultures differ widely in the degree of effectiveness of their schooling in submissiveness. Yet, in history up to date, there has been no schooling that has been able to guarantee to tyrants that their subjects will not revolt at last at some intolerable turn of the screw. The revolting-point may be reached sooner in Irishmen than in Germans, and sooner in Germans than in Russians or in Chinese; but in all human beings, hitherto, there has always been a point at which the worm has turned. Even when we have made all allowance for the application of new psychological techniques in the service of tyranny, past experience seems to make it unlikely that human tyrants will ever succeed in taking mankind right out of history, so long as human life—and, with it, Man’s mulish nature—continues to survive on Earth.

Tom Scott

The Bride

I dreamed a luesome dream o ye yestreen.
 Ye stuid in dawin fields agin a purpour luft,
 And a tree o floueran starns rase frae your croun.
 Lown* as a simmer sea ye stuid, your breists
 Keekan frae the lint-locks o your hair,
 And ye were leaman § with a radiance eterne:
 Ye, my evir-virgin, evir-breedan bride.

Your waddin kiss, the warld your bodie is,
 Are brenned ayebydan in my benmaist hert,
 As Psyche’s oil in Eros’ shouther brenned.

Wap your love-spells round me evirmair,
 Bind me til ye with your daethless love
 My queen, my queyn, the douchter o our God,
 Lead me on throu evirgrouwan licht, and be
 My love, my ain, the guid o the god in me.

In burns o immortal rain, baptise me love.

* calm § glowing