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THE PAST AS LIBERATION FROM HISTORY

by

Scott P. Culclasure

A Dissertation Submitted to
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The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
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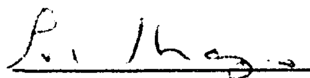

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APPROVAL PAGE

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The purpose of this research was to explore the difference between the social construction of history and the lived experience we call the past. The author's thesis is that by failing to distinguish between the two we risk unquestionably accepting as authoritative accounts of the past in which we have no voice. The author builds on the desire to create an identity rooted in the past to argue that the unheard stories we should most value are those that challenge our assumptions of justice, opportunity, and fairness.

Chapter I, "Fashioning History: A Personal Account," demonstrates how selective and incomplete even the best-intentioned histories are by describing the inevitable gaps that appear in the author's attempt to arrange the fragmented knowledge of his family's history.

Chapter II, "Teacher As Historian," offers a memoir of historical research to explore what it means for the public school teacher to cross the boundary from transmitter to creator of knowledge.

Chapter III, "Teacher As Apostle of Dangerous Knowledge," asserts that the teacher subverts the established order by going from recovering individual stories of a personal identity rooted in the past to seeking those narratives that require an evaluation of society's present arrangement of power.

Chapter IV, "The Limits of Enlightenment," argues that recognizing our limitations does not remove from us the burden of acting within them and attempting to push beyond them to effect change.

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INTRODUCTION

PAST AS PRESENT

Perhaps Southerners, living in a land that has experienced both great destructiveness in the past and a headlong rush into the present, possess a heightened sense of loss and dislocation. Certainly the novelist Ellen Glasgow keenly felt how the past can unexpectedly pervade the present, describing as she did Asa Timberlake's state as he watched the house of his childhood being torn down:

> They will never again build like this, he thought. Dignity is an anachronism. Yes, the old house was going out with its age, with its world, with its manners, with its fashion in architecture.
>
> Suddenly, it seemed to him that stillness was gathering without and within. He stood alone in a lost hemisphere, while time flowed on above, around, and beyond him. Muffled discords from the present, now near, now far, rushed toward him, assailed his ears, and dropped back in the tumult. He heard cars speeding, horns blowing, feet hurrying, voices calling, dogs barking, radios crooning, starlings chattering as they settled to roost. Then, while he listened, the sounds dwindled; the moment broke up and vanished. . . .[1]

Glasgow believed her theme to be universal: that "the modern temper, as it pressed round me, in a single community, appeared confused, vacillating, uncertain, and distracted from permanent values," traits which characterized a community caught "between an age that is slipping out and an age that is hastening in."[2]

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[1] Ellen Glasgow, *In This Our Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1941) 8.

[2] Ellen Glasgow, *A Certain Measure: An Interpretation of Prose Fiction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943) 249.

Glasgow's last novels were written at a time when the contrast between two ages was especially poignant: the 1,845 Civil War veterans who gathered for the seventy-fifth Gettysburg reunion in 1938 were treated with the spectacle of a simulated air attack by B-17 bombers. Like the protagonists in Glasgow's novels, we also live in seemingly dissolving communities where we grasp "frantically at the running shadow of happiness."[3] Unsettled by a life in which all the old certainties--family, faith, work, an identity secure in these things--seem to be dissolving, we suspect that others are robbing us, yet who, and in what manner, we cannot exactly say.

The public schools are especially well situated to witness and, sadly, contribute to the alienation of individuals from each other and their community by helping to carry the banner proclaiming that our greatest responsibility is to foster economic competitiveness, heedless of capitalism's dislocating effects. While those who work in schools cannot be held responsible for every affliction public education suffers, we should be expected to recognize that by declining to ask why schools are like they are, we may be passing judgments on our students that we would loathe if they were more forthrightly articulated.

The social construction we call history is essential in satisfying our ingrained desire for the past to explain who we are. The histories we tell, however, too often deny stories that contradict the progressive, optimistic view of our culture we like to portray in a public school setting. Ironically, it is these very stories, tragic as they are, that we most need to recall, not for the pointless exercise of making us feel ashamed, but to cause us to question whether society's present arrangement of power is the most equitable we can hope for. We turn to the richness and variety of the past to find the empowering identities that our

[3] Glasgow, *A Certain Measure* 250.

more narrowly conceived histories frequently deny us--hence the title of this dissertation.

Chapter I, "Fashioning History: A Personal Account," demonstrates how selective and incomplete even the best-intentioned histories are by describing the inevitable gaps appearing in the author's attempt to arrange the fragmented knowledge of his family's history. Not only must we struggle with the incompleteness of our knowledge, we must also undertake to recognize how the need for a viable identity in the present shapes our understanding of the past.

Chapter II, "Teacher As Historian," focuses on the author's exploration of the life of Edward Isham, the poor white southerner who was hanged in 1860 for the murder he committed under his alias, "Hardaway Bone." This memoir of historical research explores what it means for the public school teacher to cross the boundary from transmitter to creator of knowledge. At once a meditation on embodying both of these roles, this chapter also considers how the present offers a commentary on the past.

Chapter III, "Teacher As Apostle of Dangerous Knowledge," asserts that the teacher's role subverts the established order when we go beyond individual stories of a personal identity rooted in the past to seek those narratives that challenge how we have conceived justice, opportunity, and fairness. Rejected is postmodernism's argument that historical narrative merely maintains the existing conditions in our society because it is incapable of offering critical analysis.

Chapter IV, "The Limits of Enlightenment," argues that what we can know is limited by the incompleteness of our views of the past and of our own selves. While acknowledging that ours is a flawed existence, we are saved from

tragedy by insisting that we retain the agency needed to change the world. Paradoxically, recognizing our limitations does not remove from us the burden of acting within them and attempting to push beyond them to effect change. Only by faith in transcending the present can we morally justify our teaching.

CHAPTER I

FASHIONING HISTORY: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

We struggle to arrange the shards of our personal past into patterns that help us make sense of who we are. Unlike the pieces of a broken pot, however, our life stories can be ordered in various and equally plausible arrangements. While the healthiest of us understand that some configurations more closely resemble the facts as a bystander might observe them, we also come to accept that even our most persuasive fashionings are riddled with incompleteness, puzzlement and paradox. No matter how we try, the patterns will remain fragmentary.

Ludwig van Beethoven offers one particularly vivid, if unconscious, example of an individual attempting to fashion a usable past. In a study informed by Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Maynard Solomon describes a composer who was convinced, despite documentation to the contrary available to him, that he had been born a year later than was commonly acknowledged and who was unwilling, regardless of how it might reflect upon his mother's reputation, to deny persistent rumors that Johann van Beethoven had not been his father. Admiring of the accomplished *Kapellmeister* who was his paternal grandfather, and resentful of the drunken musical mediocrity who his father, Beethoven fantasized a royal parentage to ease the "matrix of negative feelings" fostered by a painful childhood.[1] Never mind for now the factual truthfulness on which Beethoven built his fantasy. Honesty was less important to Beethoven

[1] Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1977) 22.

than his need for empowerment by disconnecting himself with a past he rejected.

Our knowledge of the past is always incomplete and, most importantly, selective. Consciously or not, we choose which stories to tell, which means that other stories remain untold. Furthermore, as the example from Beethoven's life demonstrates, the stories we use to mold our identity may rest more on fantasy than fact. Selection, omission, and distortion are the plagues that afflict each of us but most especially concern the historian.

Consider how three sketches drawn from a family genealogy demonstrate the challenges of coming to terms with the past. The three sketches, together with diversions into other branches of the family, make no claim to the authoritativeness most historians hope to bring to their work. Rather than marking destinations, they point down lines of inquiry that may never find permanent resolution.

The first sketch moves us from the Old World to the New. The destructiveness of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) left a German population in tatters and political and ecclesiastical administrations in chaos. While the Treaty of Westphalia ended the religious wars of the Reformation, the Rhine River valley further suffered at the brutally aggressive foreign policy of France's Louis XIV, whose armies swept through the area beginning in 1672 during their assault on the Netherlands. Years of strife helped to deaden the reform spirit of Lutheranism, providing a fertile ground for the multiplicity of Pietists who wished to return Christianity to what they believed were its "experimental, emotional, individual, biblically centered, and ethically minded" origins.[2]

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[2] Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (New York: Macmillan, 1968) 119.

Not surprisingly, the German Pietists who called themselves Brethren met with distrust and persecution from civil and church authorities fearful of the mysticism that characterized these radical Protestants. The Brethren who gathered at their "mother church" in the Westphalian town of Schwarzenau eventually determined to emigrate to William Penn's colony of dissenters. In 1729, a large contingent of Brethren arrived in the Germantown, Pennsylvania, area to build a community that rested upon their desire to live separate from the ways of the world. Included among the new arrivals was Johann Heinrich Kalkglässer, his wife, and their four children. Within a few years, the family settled in a commune along the Conestoga frontier called Ephrata.[3] Much of his later life remains veiled to us, but, before his death in 1748, Kalkglässer was a respected enough leader to have been appointed to a delegation that explored the sensitive topic of establishing closer ties with Zinzendorf's Moravians.[4] Although Kalkglässer desired to leave at least a portion of his estate to Ephrata, the commune soon afterward began its decline into obscurity.[5]

The threads of this family history are lost for a time. Even so, we know that the frontier turmoil of the French and Indian War ended the isolated existence at Ephrata. At the same time, Virginia's Shenandoah Valley began to attract Brethren, Mennonites and Dunkards.[6] Perhaps, therefore, it was a

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[3] The Ephrata settlement is notable especially for its spiritual music and *Frakturschriften* art. In addition, Conrad Beissel, Ephrata's charismatic founder, provided the subject for Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* (1948). The settlement has been preserved as a Pennsylvania state park. See E. G. Alderfer, *The Ephrata Commune: An Early American Counterculture* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985).

[4] Alderfer 80.

[5] *Collections of the Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania: Abstracts of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Wills, 1721-1820*, vol. 24.

[6] Alderfer 135-144.

descendant of Heinrich Kalkglässer who years later came to lease a manufacturing mill on the Shadwell estate of Thomas Jefferson. A man named Colclaser--Jefferson provides no first name, but the 1820 federal census for Albemarle County, Virginia, lists one Daniel Coleclaser--is referred to several times in Jefferson's *Farm Book* with entries like this one: "1817. Aug 2 Colclaser says that a man saws & rives the timber & dresses completely for setting up staves for 250 barrels a day, 17. staves to a barrel."[7] Despite Jefferson's interest in manufacturing and his considerable expenditures on the mill house, dam and canal, the investment proved a bad one, owing to "poor management, controversies with the lessees, and the constant repairs" the facility required.[8] By the early 1820s, Colclaser had given his part of the lease to Thomas Eston Randolph and disappeared from Jefferson's records. Unknown is whether he continued to work in the area as a miller.

Once again a gap appears. Did Colclaser's relatives, like so many before them, use the Shenandoah Valley as a highway to the Carolinas? Perhaps, then, the miller was kin to a Baptist who lived in South Carolina's Edgefield County. The Horn's Creek Baptist Church recorded in 1838 that, "Brother William Colclazur having accidentally killed one of his own Negro boys by striking him on the head with a stick, disciplined himself."[9] Although in this instance unspecified, church discipline was "deeply rooted in the evangelical sense of

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[7] Daniel Coleclaser is described as aged between twenty-six and forty-five years and employed in manufactures. His household also included a woman of the same age span--presumably his wife--and a young female slave. See Fourth Census, 1820: Albemarle County, Virginia, Population Schedule. The Jefferson quote is from Edwin Morris Betts, ed., *Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987) 123.

[8] Betts 341-342.

[9] Quoted in Orville Vernon Burton, *In My Father's House Are Many Mansions: Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985) 59.

community and in a desire to create a culture rooted in otherworldly compassion."[10] One wonders whether Colclazur was stirred by a half-forgotten memory of the family's earlier devotion to communal life. How he balanced his faith, his slaveholding, and his punishment is unrecorded, but he was restored to the church's fellowship. Whether he continued to prosper as he (or perhaps his father) apparently did at the time of the 1830 federal census--when, aged between fifty and sixty years, William Culclazier was listed as living in a household that included six slaves--is also uncertain, for his name does not appear again in census reports.[11]

Riddling this brief account of a family's history are numerous gaps, silences and omissions. Even the links between Kalkglässer, Colclaser, and Colclazur (Culclazier) are no more than informed speculation. Suppose, however, that the genealogy were firmly established; more fundamental concerns about the fashioning of history would remain unaddressed. No woman is named in this lineage, based as it is on paternal ancestry, and so completely

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[10] Robert M. Calhoon, *Evangelicals and Conservatives in the Early South, 1740-1861* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988) 111.

[11] Fifth Census, 1830: Edgefield County, South Carolina, Population Schedule. In addition to William Culclazier, the household included a white female, aged forty to fifty years, a white male, aged fifteen to twenty years, and a white female, aged fifteen to twenty years. Three male slaves were listed as aged under ten years, twenty to twenty-four years, and twenty-four to thirty-six years. Three female slaves were also listed, one in each of the same age spans. According to her obituary, wife Elizabeth [née ?] Culclazer was born May 28, 1787. She joined Horn's Creek Baptist Church in 1809 and married William on February 6, 1810. She died at age sixty-two on October 3, 1848. The obituary mentions only her surviving husband and daughter. On February 13, 1853, William Culclazier married Mary Ann Cartledge. Because William Culclazier's wedding dates are so widely separated, two individuals with the same name are possible. See Carlee T. McClendon, comp., *Edgefield Death Notices and Cemetery Records* (Columbia, S.C.: Hive Press, 1977) 71, 248 and *Edgefield Marriage Records, Edgefield, South Carolina: From the Late Eighteenth Century up through 1870* (Columbia, S.C.: R. L. Bryan, 1970) 44. The 1860 census shows Mrs. M. Culclazier, aged forty-five years, living in the same county as a farmer (owning $5,000 of real estate and $14,000 of personal property) with her five-year old son William J. and her brother Joseph Cartledge and sister-in-law Betsy. Eighth Census, 1860: Edgefield County, South Carolina, Population Schedule.

does a man's surname dominate antebellum documents that recovering a wife's maiden name poses a challenge. Not surprisingly in a society that severely limited a wife's ability to freely dispose of her property, a woman maintaining a personal identity, not to mention a legal standing, separate from her husband was difficult.[12]

Court records and governors's papers offer underutilized ways of capturing the voices of humbler classes of citizens. Legal cases in which women are party dramatically illustrate the difficulty of clearly discerning them while at the same time illuminating the bonds between wives and their husbands. In the reporting of the 1855 trial of Alvin Preslar for the killing of his wife, for example, the brutally beaten Esther was not even named (newspaper accounts fill this void). All that can be discerned of her is that she was "a fat woman." Two trials were required before Preslar was convicted of murder, in part because of the defense's arguments that Alvin's drunkenness should be considered a mitigating factor and that Esther was in no immediate danger of losing her life when she fled their cabin and needlessly exposed herself to a damp night air. Ironically, even the status of the hapless children, one of whom was hardly a child at eighteen years, was invoked in petitioning the governor to spare Alvin from the gallows.[13]

Incorporating the stories of women into historical narratives has not been easy. The crudest method of doing so has been to show them heroically

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[12] Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992) 64-65.

[13] Bynum 82-83 and Scott P. Culclasure, "Edward Isham and Criminal Justice for the Poor White in Antebellum North Carolina," *Journal of Southern Legal History* III (1994): 80-83. That a group of "ladies" was willing to add their names to the petitions calling for Preslar's pardon suggests their evangelical role of agents seeking the mercy of the governor. See petitions and correspondence dated December 15, 20, and 22, 1856, Governors Papers, 141 and Governors Letter Books, 43: 635, 639, 642-645, 651, North Carolina State Archives.

performing what had been seen as men's work. The effect can be puzzling for readers unsure of women's roles, as suggested by a photograph caption given in one high school history textbook's tediously detailed chapter on the Civil War: "Women played a variety of crucial roles on both sides during the war. Some women . . . disguised themselves as men and joined the front lines. Others . . . performed important medical tasks."[14] The exceptional does not do much to illustrate the typical, and while the text may acknowledge this fact, its bland, fact-laden paragraphs do more to gloss over than illuminate the experiences of most women. For the great majority of them, free and slave, throughout much of our history, lives exhausted in childbearing and homemaking reflected more of a somber, Hobbesian struggle than a consensual, Lockean arrangement. Women like Abigail Adams, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Ida B. Wells, who both entered and challenged male domains, rightfully should come into the pantheon of American luminaries, but they may help us comprehend the lives of their obscure cohorts only by negative example. "[I]f the vindication of women depends on the discovery of an adequate supply of forgotten writers and power-brokers," Robert Darnton has asked, "what is to be done if the numbers turn out to be disappointing?"[15]

What is to be done, as Darnton acknowledged, is to examine how womanhood has been understood across the ages. As with Esther Preslar, glimpsed through the transcript of a murder trial, we see a striking image that nevertheless easily escapes us, like the silvery likeness of a daguerreotype.

[14] The example is taken from one of the more sophisticated history textbooks used in high schools. See Carol Berkin et al., *American Voices: A History of the United States* (Glenview, Illinois: ScottForesman, 1992) 230-231.

[15] Robert Darnton, "Cherchez la Femme," rev. of *Monsieur d'Eon Is a Woman: A Tale of Political Intrigue and Sexual Masquerade*, by Gary Kates, *New York Review of Books* 10 August 1995: 22.

Continuing to search court records we also realize that Esther kept a grim company with other women whose partially documented lives (and deaths) help describe the status of their sex. Not content with the degrading of a spouse forced to sleep on the floor with a quilt while he occupied a feather bed, for example, Samuel Parker Perry murdered his wife Caroline--described as "idiotic" in the 1850 federal census--by striking her head with an axe and then throwing her down a well.[16] "Damn you, it's nothing to you if I kill her," Perry snarled at a woman neighbor who dared to interfere in an earlier beating, and it is very likely that the cause of Caroline's derangement had much to do with Samuel's treatment that also included his openly keeping a mistress.[17] Like Alvin Preslar, Samuel Parker Perry was hanged for his crime, but not before the governor of North Carolina reviewed petitions signed by individuals--including jurors--who thought that the defendant should be pardoned.[18] While individual men might be condemned by the law, society understood a husband's disciplining of his wife and, in the event of her death, the mitigation of factors like drunkenness. To be sure, as Victoria Bynum has demonstrated, there were limits to the brutality communities were willing to accept; to be fair, both Preslar

[16] Perry is listed in the 1850 census as a farmer aged thirty-five years and owning $1,000 worth of real estate. Caroline was aged thirty-six years. The household also included Mary, aged nine years, and Mary Lasiter, aged thirty-one years. Polly Lassiter was identified in court testimony as having assumed the position of mistress of the household after the onset of Caroline's mental illness. Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Wake County, North Carolina, Population Schedule. The case is reported in State v. Samuel P. Perry, 44 N.C. 330 (1853). Testimony from the trial, which does not survive in court records, was printed in "The State vs. Parker Perry," *North Carolina Standard* (Raleigh), April 20, 1853.

[17] "The State vs. Parker Perry," *North Carolina Standard* (Raleigh), April 20, 1853. The newspaper concluded that, "No verdict of the Jury was ever more just than the one rendered in this case."

[18] September [ ], 28, and October 14, 1853, Governors Papers, 134 and October 14, 1853, Governors Letter Books, 41: 140-141, North Carolina State Archives. See also Culclasure, "Edward Isham" 81, 85.

and Perry were condemned by their peers. Inescapable in this patriarchal society, however, was the fact that violence and intoxication were male domains just as surely as was the management of property, marriage and divorce.[19]

The condition of a woman's life in the antebellum South, where she was both sainted and disciplined, makes for a richer history than one afforded by a frustrating search in a culture which tightly circumscribed women's roles for the "great women" to match with the "great men." At the same time, the temptation to view southern women simply as hapless victims robs them of their humanity just as much as trying to evaluate them by a man's measure of success. It also illustrates an unwillingness to search beyond the traditional sources--the political and literary documents of a man's public world--and consider conceptualizations of history which do not denigrate the common and the private.

If a woman's world was more domestic and less public than a man's, and therefore less likely to have been documented, it nevertheless was vibrant and resourceful in preserving a sense of family and community, a theme that has attracted attention especially from historians of the South. "Family, kin, and neighbors defined the boundaries of the social world in the countryside," write the authors of *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*.[20] That families working in the booming cotton mills of the New South preserved a sense of community despite their dislocation from the land, conclude the authors whose collection of oral histories from Piedmont mill town families comprise the core of the work's documentation, owes to the mixture of cooperation and

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[19] The author is indebted to Victoria E. Bynum for emphasizing how drunkenness was a masculine prerogative and, therefore, a mitigating factor that was gendered. See also Bynum 83.

[20] Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones, and Christopher B. Daly, *Like A Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987) 23.

resistance which characterized their response to the factory system's paternalism. Because families, and not simply individuals, took up "public work" in the cotton mills, women did much to preserve community values of sustenance that previously had served families struggling to survive the dislocations wrought by the rise of white tenantry, the grip of the lien system, and the decline of cotton prices. The near past allows historians to interview its participants. For earlier generations, such knowledge frequently is too ephemeral to have been preserved deliberately, although its traces may be discerned indirectly through folklore, custom, or literature.[21]

Recovering the voices of women, whether through oral histories, diaries, letters, and memoirs, or though census reports and court records, remains less of a challenge than thinking of history in terms of family and community instead of individuals. Economic questions can be framed by examining household production as well as the dynamics between the planter and the market. Slave culture becomes as important as slave production. The role of faith and religion reemerge as central concerns for understanding how a life was lived. Honor and virtue explain as much about past life as do politics and economics. The common receives attention just as the extraordinary does. In short, life in the past more closely resembles life in the present with its complex webs of relationship and spheres of action.

The drama of murderous crime, courtroom testimony, and earnest petitioning portrays the tensions that exist beneath a society's outward

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[21] Two recent examples of how historians can tease meaning out of the obscure include E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1991) and Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995). While Thompson focuses on the culture of English working people in the eighteenth century, Darnton explores how French public opinion was formulated and articulated through censured but surreptitiously popular works of literature.

consensus. These incidents should not, however, be mistaken for representing how most southerners, no matter their gender, color, or status, lived. More nearly typical was the life of Sarah, wife of Nathan Wesley Culclasure, although she eventually faced the daunting task of surviving a man's work. Nathan and Sarah Culclasure--aged twenty-six and twenty-eight respectively--owned $3,000 of real estate and $4,000 of personal property according to the 1860 federal census.[22] Their substantial holdings near St. Matthews, South Carolina, included six slaves.[23] None of the couple's three sons was old enough to contribute to the family's labor. Even so, Nathan enlisted, perhaps through conscription, into the Confederate army in November 1863.[24] Hospitalized with a fever in the spring of 1864 and then taken prisoner in October at Strasburg, Virginia (site of German settlements in the Shenandoah Valley a century earlier), the war was surely a trying experience for him and his family.

Nathan lived long enough after he returned from the war to father three more children, two daughters and a son. Shortly before the taking of the 1870 census, however, he died, because the thirty-nine-year old Sarah was listed as head of household.[25] The two eldest boys--Daniel, aged fourteen years, and Nathan, aged twelve years--were described as farm laborers. The farm was valued at only $1,000, and Sarah's personal property was listed at a mere $200. Whether the freedmen who once served the family continued to work on the

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[22] Eighth Census: 1860, Orangeburg County, South Carolina, Population Schedule.

[23] Eighth Census: 1860, Orangeburg County, South Carolina, Slave Schedule. Considered as property rather than persons, enslaved people were listed in a separate schedule in the 1860 census by age, gender, and race (black or mulatto). The six slaves of Culclasure's estate consisted of three black females, aged seventy, fourteen, and seven years, and three black males, aged thirty-five, twelve, and twelve years.

[24] Confederate Military Service Records, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

[25] Ninth Census, 1870: Orangeburg County, South Carolina, Population Schedule.

farm or had struck out on their own is unknown, although either way their lives, just as the lives of their former owners, certainly had been profoundly changed.

A family history might easily overlook Sarah and concentrate instead on the bloodline of her children. Sarah, however, offers a story worth the attempt to recover. In the devastation of the region and the dislocation of her own life, how did Sarah sustain her family, especially in a time of declining land values, rising taxes, and transformed relations with black labor? Perhaps, as the wife of a slaveholding farmer, she possessed the knowledge and fortitude to undertake the work of her now-dead husband.[26] Certainly her children, who continued to live in the area after 1880 when she last appeared in a census report, came of age early. In any event, her story was shared by other women who lived through the era of Reconstruction without the husbands of their youth.[27]

There are other, more difficult to acknowledge omissions in this family genealogy. William Colclazur's beating to death a slave points to a particularly haunting part of our nation's history. So, too, does the life of another member of the family: David Culclasure--not the David of Orange Parish, South Carolina, who in 1840 owned twenty-eight slaves, but an individual with the same name who lived most of his life after the Civil War.[28] The latter-day David Culclasure

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[26] That white women who were listed in postwar censuses as the head of household were likely to be relatively old, widowed, and rarely with very small children is shown in Burton 284-287.

[27] For an example of how Reconstruction's stresses affected the landowning status of the Rosetta Hurley of Montgomery County, North Carolina, see Bynum 152-154. Of yeoman stock and an unmarried mother and, Hurley's fate was likely more extreme than that which faced Sarah Culclasure. The 1880 census described Sarah as a widowed farmer with four children still living at home. Two sons, Charles, the twenty year old, and Francis, the twelve-year old, were farm laborers. Although the sixteen-year old Lizzie had attended school, Francis and twelve-year old Marion were listed as illiterate. Tenth Census: 1880, Orangeburg County, South Carolina, Population Schedule.

[28] Sixth Census: 1840, Orangeburg County, South Carolina, Population Schedule.

was sixty years old in 1910.[29] He farmed in the same Orangeburg County, South Carolina, as had others of the same surname. He, however, was black. Although he could read, his wife Lillian, to whom he had been married for thirty-eight years, could not. Together with daughter Leila (who herself had fifteen living children), two youthful grandchildren (who may have been Leila's), and a son also named David and his wife of six years, the family worked land they did not own. All the children and grandchildren listed were literate, but their father and grandfather was old enough to have been born a slave about 1850.

An Orangeburg District tax list of 1851 shows the estate of David Culclasure, the slaveholder, possessing 1,500 acres of land and fifteen slaves (for which the estate was assessed $9.45).[30] The old man was about eighty when he died in 1846, not long before the birth of David Culclasure, the slave. Whether any connection existed between two individuals living close to each other and sharing a common given name and an uncommon surname is unclear, although inescapable is the question of whether the black Culclasure was a member of the same family. Quite apart from the blood ties that bound many slaves to their masters, the two men--one white and the other black--were joined to each other by a system that in different ways degraded both of them.

Put another way, the question of relation bears on the present: Do the sins of the past inextricably tie us together in the present? We fear the answer, not simply from dread of discovering that we share taboo blood lines, but because we may find we are responsible. The past does not fasten guilt upon the present so much as it does responsibility for insuring that we do not, within our limited

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[29] Thirteenth Census: 1910, Orangeburg County, South Carolina, Population Schedule.

[30] "1851 Orangeburg District Tax List," *The South Carolina Magazine of Ancestral Research* VII (1979): 18.

capabilities, further its evils. After all, history is our creation, used to understand the past, and we are responsible to each other for choosing to tell some stories while leaving others, whether out of ignorance or design, untold. To deny this responsibility is to deny our shared humanity. We should not be surprised when we discover that those who have felt excluded from history also believe that it has nothing to say to the present. Resentful of authority unjustly wielded, much of the present generation resents the slightest imputation that any one has anything important to tell them.

How, then, are the two David Culclasures--white and black--to be reconciled with each other? One is struck by how they are presented in census reports--the former attached to the figures that described his holdings and the latter joined with the names of the three generations who lived in his household (to be fair, a function of the different census formats, but also an occasion for wonder). Their stories, as best as they can be recovered, must be recognized as equally valid and, most essentially, as related. Despite the enmity that may have existed between them, their lives were defined by the other's inescapable presence.[31] The importance of their stories is less concerned with narrow questions of labor and production than with how a sense of humanity was preserved in the presence of evil.

No southerner--past or present--can make sense of his or her history without reference to others who, though different, are connected. Pretending otherwise represents a seduction of the present to a distorted view of the past, a

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[31] On the gathering of families, black and white, "that would shatter a century of silence" about life on a North Carolina plantation, see Dorothy Spruill Redford, *Somerset Homecoming: Recovering a Lost Heritage* (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1988) 205-237. For a personal recollection of the labryrinthine relationships between whites and blacks in a North Carolina village of the 1950s, see Melton A. McLaurin, *Separate Pasts: Growing Up White in the Segregated South* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1987).

seduction because it pretends that a seamless, comfortable, half-story faithfully reflects our paradoxical, quirky, and sometimes hurtful selves. If we cannot find ourselves in the past it is as if our existence is denied. To forget the complexities of our existence is more than misleading; the people we omit are wronged.

In an era when the old middle class guarantees of steady employment and a secure family have evaporated, we long for stability yet hardly have the patience to listen to stories we do not tell, fearful that they will somehow further diminish our significance. Instead, we exhaust ourselves with unwitting contests over symbols like the Confederate flag. As an uneven prosperity heightens the disparity between city and countryside, affluent and marginal, well educated and poorly schooled, white southerners who once were confident of their superiority strive to preserve their identity by talking of heritage while black southerners tire of being expected to patiently bear the latent hostility embedded in the memory of a secession movement which promised to constitutionally guarantee slavery's permanence. As a symbol, the Battle Flag is only the outward manifestation of the contest for historical memory, testimony to how we rely on the past for understanding who we are. Were we more accepting of the paradox winding through our history that links slavery and freedom, we might be more accepting of the need both sides feel to find meaning for themselves in a history that cannot help but be shared. (Maintaining a state identity, however, that is rooted more in resistance to the civil rights movement of the 1950s--when the stars and cross appeared on state flags--than in the Civil War is another question. As Howard Zinn has argued, "we must not accept the memory of states as our own. Nations are not communities and never have been."[32])

[32] Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995) 9.

So uncertain are we of our identity that even when we do discover our links with the past we continue to hope for further validation. How important is it to say, for example, that the modest Daniel Colclaser worked for the everlasting Thomas Jefferson? Certainly we would know much less about him if not for Jefferson's correspondence. At the same time, Colclaser seems to grow in significance because of their association, which says more about the present's need for status than it does about what the miller might have thought. Singled out as individuals, Jefferson's merit in deserving historical scholarship would outweigh that of Colclaser. After all, we live in a nation that has enshrined much of his political thinking. We also live in a nation, however, built through the work of countless, anonymous laborers. Even Jefferson could not enjoy his life as gentleman farmer without the efforts of his workers, many of whom did not even enjoy freedom. Basing history solely on the studies of individuals makes it easy to value some over others. In contrast, tracing the relationship between employer and employed (master and slave or husband and wife) points us to a history in which the workings of a community's relationships are as important as the individuals in those relationships.

Of the family members earlier described, Heinrich Kalkglässer remains the most enigmatic, and not simply because of his remoteness in time. While Kalkglässer clearly lived in community with his peers, he also lived in a setting so different from any we inhabit as to be nearly incomprehensible. The Ephrata commune in which he and his family lived, shunning as it did the temptations of greater spiritual influence and a prosperous material existence, lacked the flexibility to survive as a distinctive society the past the early nineteenth century.[33] At Ephrata, the individual acted only within the strict confines of the

[33] Alderfer 77, 83.

community which was dedicated to preserving a vision of transcendent truth from the wiles of a hostile world. Missionary activities notwithstanding, the commune did not survive in a land that was more attuned to the pragmatism of Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard than to the Brethren tracts his press also printed.

As the world's first "modern" nation, dedicated to the principle that the individual possesses rights derived from nature, the United States ironically has provided both the opportunity for communal enterprises like Ephrata and the virtual guarantee of their impermanence. Neither intense individuality nor the close atmosphere of communal living remain fresh in the other's company. The decision of Heinrich Kalkglässer's descendants, however, to leave Ephrata for new settlements not imbued with the founding generation's sense of mission carried its own risks. Shorn of a common sense of purpose and place within a close knit community, the new settlers were left to struggle on their own. While the industrialization of both manufacturing and agriculture were required to accelerate and dramatize the plight of individuals competing within vast impersonal markets, as early as the 1830s Alexis de Tocqueville observed the importance of "the art of association" in maintaining a civil society.[34] The Ephrata commune--however otherworldly its existence may appear to a less

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[34] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York: Anchor Books, 1969) 517. Tocqueville was referring to associations that were intellectual and moral rather than political and economic. Churches, hospitals, prisons, and schools were among the associations that attracted his attention. The effect of capitalist agriculture on freeholding production in the post Civil War South has been an important theme in many recent studies, including Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism; Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, ed., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); and Allen Tullos, *Habits of Industry: White Culture and the Transformation of the Carolina Piedmont* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989). A valuable summary of recent scholarship on the subject appears in Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

mystical, more rational audience--posed a tension familiar to contemporary society: how identity is created within community and, conversely, maintained apart from it.[35]

Unlike us, the Ephrata settlers counted on the aid of a God who both joined together and separately identified. The commune's belief that God's spirit could be felt within each individual, calling the faithful to forsake the worldly for the heavenly, requires a transcendence of self-interest we find impossible to make. (Even the call for rebirth made by our culture's evangelical Protestantism is pitched in terms of a self-interest that is as palpable as it is pragmatic. The new believer hopes both to save himself from eternal damnation and to find himself blessed in this life as well.) Our society's brave assertion of democratic truths--in which more recently we also have nearly lost faith--remains our closest collective approach to transcendence. Even so, the individualism which has grown out of our assertion of rights has lead us down so many separate and lonely paths that we fear entangling ourselves in thickets of economic hardship and personal alienation more than we hope to pursue happiness.

The preaching of cracked, old certainties about work, family, and moral values in strident and masculine voices sounds the depths of our insecurity. In our fear of the future, we mistakenly try to cling to a past too reified to sustain us. History becomes a burden when we believe that its experience can be

[35] That small, tightly knit and isolated communities still flourish (apart from the widely publicized paranoia of religious cults and the militia movement) is evident in a recent account of residents of the privately maintained Bear Creek community near Seattle, Washington. At Bear Creek, the "public" space of streets and parks are available only to members of the community. As the houses at Bear Creek are in the $300,000 to 600,000 price range, Seattle leaders worry that that affluent voters in this community will choose not to support bond measures designed to improve public facilities in Seattle. See Timothy Egan, "Many Seek Security in Private Communities," *New York Times* 3 September 1995: A1. Whether private communities are united by more than a desire to flee a world peopled with differences is unclear, but the characteristic they embody of maintaining an identity in an insecure environment drives the fears of many more individuals than those who can afford to live in them.

transferred intact to the present. Our lives are our own. While their potentialities are sometimes limited by the past's influence, they cannot be lived as if the only possibilities are the old ones.

In a study that has attempted to link the study of history with modernism, Marshall Berman asserts that "remembering the modernisms of the nineteenth century can give us vision and courage to create the modernism of the twenty-first."[36] In so doing, Berman implicitly challenges the notion of history marching to the drumbeat of progress by suggesting that, because our knowledge is so fragmentary, we can learn from how past generations coped with the modern era's turmoil. Berman's emphasis that the past is necessary for realizing meaning in the present is corollary to the idea that the present shapes our view of the past. The old certainties may continue to teach and to inspire, but they will not substitute for the striving required of us to determine their validity for today. Should we choose now to abandon the upkeep of a civic culture in which we can find common ground without surrendering our differences, our quest for personal meaning also will be frustrated. The paradox is inescapable: only in the security of community can individual identity be realized. Conversely, without the liberty to fashion an identity richly textured in historical understanding, the secure community we long for will be unrealized.

Despite our pragmatic reputation, the peoples of this nation have espoused transcendent principles that serve, when we allow them, to unite us. Even with its gaps and omissions, the personal history related earlier embodies these principles: Heinrich Kalkglässer's flight from religious persecution; Daniel

[36] Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982) 36. Berman's belief that modernism leaves us "psychically naked" (129) appears to underemphasize the difficulty of leaving the past behind. The proposition that human possibilities for remaking the world are unlimited points to the hubris that has plagued modernity and the victims of its gulags, killing fields, and concentration camps.

Colclaser's struggle to make viable an economic undertaking; William Colclazur's awareness of his complicity with evil and the limits to his authority. Furthermore, each of these individual accounts exist only in relation to a broader social context, whether the context be the individual living within a religious commune, the affairs linking the great to the forgotten man, or the relations binding together the free and the enslaved. The pieces of our stories are incomplete fragments except as they are joined with the pieces of other's stories.

Enabling each individual to find him or herself in the past may pain us, especially if, for example, we discover that the descendants of the white David Culclasure have fared better than the ones of the black David Culclasure for no better reason than the color of their skin. We should be careful, however, to remember that what we see in the past is shaped by the concerns of the present. While we may be required to live with the consequences of past wrongs, we distort the past by expecting it to conform with our values. Herein lies another paradox: while the history we fashion reflects our points of view, the past cannot be condemned for failing to share, or even recognize, our sensibilities. Instead, what is worthy of our execration is the use of history to condemn those of the present generation. The absence of people we have deemed unworthy of study in our historical accounts should not blind us to how history-telling involves chosen ways of perceiving the past and not the past itself.

In this sense, history is as much about the present as it is the past. The family account herein related attempted to emphasize the gaps and omissions, the societal context, and the unsung and forgotten out of the belief that these elements are the ones most lacking in how history is presented to young people today. At issue is more than a desire to enliven the curriculum. Of greater

concern is the students' sense that they are being denied their identity by being disconnected from their past. The stories we come to tell, and listen to, may be dark, but they are redeemed with the dignity that humanity maintains even as it displays the greatest indignities.

Ultimately, the fragments of a family's story speak to the identity of the author just as it does to his ancestors. This account represents an author's desire to sense rootedness, ponder faith, find significance, and weigh guilt. The messages teased from the story are moral because they reflect a conviction that our existence is understood by contemplating our inescapably lonely struggle for validation as we yearn for closeness with others. Paradoxes like this one, in turn, point to an underlying belief that we best apprehend life by balancing an awareness of its limitations with a faith in its potentialities. Such an attitude, asserts Christopher Lasch, embodies a hope that rests not on the optimist's belief in future progress but on confidence in a past which shows "that trust is never completely misplaced, even though it is never completely justified either and therefore destined inevitably to disappointments."[37]

We struggle with the incompleteness of our knowledge, but, instead of despair, we wonder at the miracle of creativity that makes history a birthright for each of us. Even so, the awareness of our dependence upon others fosters a humility about our ability to faithfully capture all of the past's complexities. In telling our stories, we will find that some are more convincing than others because they more carefully maintain an historical integrity. We cannot succumb to the corrosive fancy that insisting on fidelity to standards of historical research means no more than furthering the oppression of the status quo. How our stories are told becomes as important as which ones we choose to hear.

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[37] Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991) 80-81.

CHAPTER II

TEACHER AS HISTORIAN

When he was hanged for the murder of James Cornelius in May 1860, few people would have mourned the fate of Edward Isham, or "Hardaway Bone," as he was called by those who knew him in North Carolina. His mother lived too far away--in Chattanooga, Tennessee--to have comforted him, even if she had known of her son's fate. Mandy Lesley [Lasley], whom Isham had taken for his wife, had died a year earlier at the time she birthed their child. The infant was living with William and Susan Reed [Reid], who knew Isham well enough to have testified at his trial to Isham's murderous language shortly before the fatal assault. Although he had successfully fled the Catawba County farm where the killing occurred, Isham was quickly tracked down and arrested in the Tennessee mountains, his pursuers no doubt spurred by Austin Cornelius's widely advertised reward of $500 for the arrest of his brother's murderer. The laborers and farmers who had crossed Isham--like the man named Clarke, whose fighting at the time of the August 1858 election resulted in an indictment against Isham for assault and battery, or Washington Sherrill, whose knife served as the murder weapon after Isham had exchanged it for his own worthless one--were likely glad to see such a rival and hothead removed from the scene. For a settled agricultural community more dependent on stability than the rough-and-tumble gold mining region of Georgia where Isham had spent much of his younger life,

Hardaway Bone's hanging must have been a relief.[1]

How ironic that someone who made as much noise as Edward Isham was so quickly and completely forgotten. His death excited nowhere the excitement as had Cornelius's, whose gravestone continues to stand long after Isham's grave, presumably unmarked, was lost. The fury of Isham's actions were overtaken by the infinitely greater whirlwind sown at places like Harpers Ferry, raided in the month of Isham's trial. As heinous as his crime was, it could not command from his countrymen the same attention as did the battlefield casualty lists newspapers soon were required to print.

Documents describing Isham soon faded from view. The court book in which Isham's case was minuted under his alias name came to be filled with other cases, filed in an out-of-the-way courthouse, and forgotten. Isham's self-told account of his life had been written by his court-appointed lawyer into a notebook which, although preserved, was neglected soon afterward, just as the lawyer himself began to look further afield than the local superior court for a career in state politics.

Historians also turned to topics they considered more promising. The poor were with them always, but the planter seemingly had disappeared, leaving behind visible traces of his existence with which to excite historical inquiry. Simple people lived simple, common lives--just as they continued to do, with their endless cycles of work, marriage, and death, punctuated by inane acts of violence after which commonplace lawyers provided token defenses in which they or no one else in authority much believed. Transient came to mean transparent, unlettered meant unimportant. For historians more interested in the

[1] The statements in this paragraph regarding Edward Isham are more fully elaborated in Scott P. Culclasure, "'I Have Killed a Damned Dog': Murder by a Poor White in the Antebellum South," *North Carolina Historical Review* LXX (January 1993): 14-39.

transformative, ordinary life--when studied at all--was subjected to a scientism that talked more of group behavior than individual lives.[2]

The poor, transient, and violent Edward Isham, however, captures our imagination because he personifies what William Faulkner described as "elapsed and yet-elapsing time."[3] Isham's elapsed time challenges the historian to interpret the rare documentation of this individual's life within a cultural context now gone. Appreciating Isham's significance comes from a variety of newer historical studies that counter the postmodernist assertion of narrative's incompatibility with critical thinking: the ways in which society has perceived poor white southerners; the significance of violence for people living in a culture saturated with it; the substratum of cultural meaning revealed by an obscure event like the murder of a substantial farmer.[4] The yet-elapsing time reminds the teacher how human alienation and suffering is evident in settings that transcend specific cultural contexts, linking present with past. Witnessing the cruelties inflicted upon our children, in ways that are sometimes casual and removed and occasionally intimate and brutal, also sensitizes a teacher to be receptive to the account of a long-dead individual like Edward Isham.

While the historian meets the challenge of recovering an historical story, the teacher is confronted with the task of understanding how knowledge is defined and then transmitted to the next generation. The roles of historian and teacher have tended toward separation, even isolation, from each other, resulting in learning that is shorn of the creativity and imagination within each of us. The

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[2] Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994) 88-89, 148-51.

[3] William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* in *Novels, 1936-1940* (New York: Library of America, 1990) 18.

[4] Appleby et al. 233.

teacher as historian--despite the frustration of being expected simultaneously to demonstrate scholarly competence to academia and educational relevance to public school administration--has the opportunity to bring students into the creative process that fashioning history requires. Involving students serves a purpose larger than illuminating an historian's work. Teachers neglect at society's peril their encouraging of young people's power to shape and validate knowledge. As a culture, we choose which stories we tell and we decide how other people should be appreciated. To pretend that knowledge is static and transmittable without being transmutable denies a trait we share in our common humanity to identify who we are and make sense for ourselves the world we have inherited.

Few of these thoughts could have been articulated when I first encountered Edward Isham, but the ways in which I came to know this historical figure speak to both past and present. Walking one afternoon along a Raleigh street that led past the Victorian houses of an earlier generation's magnates and politicians, houses whose sagging balustrades and crabgrass lawns heightened a feeling of time's memories slipping away, I wondered if I could enter the State Archives a few blocks ahead of me and capture a sense of the past by calling for some historical document to examine. Without fully comprehending it at the time, I was thinking already toward two ends: showing to myself that even as a teacher I could engage in the historian's creation of knowledge, and demonstrating to my students that the past's secrets could be revealed by anyone with an interest in doing so. Only much later would I be required to confront the realization that teachers were not supposed to behave in this fashion.

Choosing where to begin my historical inquiry was simple: I would peruse the papers of a lawyer who would have felt at home in houses like the ones lining that capital city street. David Schenck (1835-1902) practiced law as a young man, using his profession to make an entry into state politics at the time of the Civil War. To me, however, Schenck was best known for what he had done years afterward. Pursuing a passion for the history of the Revolution in the South, Schenck organized the Guilford Battleground Company in 1887, purchased neglected farm land with the money he raised through this joint-stock company, and established a memorial park that was destined, a few years after his death, to become the first National Park to commemorate a Revolutionary War battleground.

My coming of age included working under the engraved gaze of Judge Schenck at the visitor center of what was now classified as a national military park. The story of the park's establishment, as Schenck related it in his 1893 account, *A Memorial Volume of the Guilford Battle Ground Company*, was both familiar and intriguing, especially in trying to grasp how the park had changed over the years of its existence and whether it bore much resemblance to the fields and woods the soldiers of Greene and Cornwallis and the area's Quaker and Presbyterian settlers knew in 1781.[5] Surely the writer that David Schenck was had left a collection of papers residing in a depository like the State Archives, ready to be tapped for forgotten insights.

We limit our learning when we fail to hope for the serendipitous. Even so, no amount of readiness for the unexpected could have prepared me for what I

[5] David Schenck, *A Memorial Volume of the Guilford Battle Ground Company* (Greensboro, N. C.: Charles L. Van Noppen, 1893). Schenck's best known history, zealously defending North Carolina's contributions to the Revolution, is *North Carolina, 1780-'81; Being a History of the Invasion of the Carolinas by the British* (Raleigh, N. C.: Edwards & Broughton, 1889).

found in the single box of Schenck papers.[6] The discovery of Edward Isham pushed aside thoughts of the battleground, even though the young lawyer's notebook that contained the twenty-seven pages of manuscript recording Isham's story denied immediate comprehension. Who was the man whose voice sounded so clearly from the pages written in Schenck's hand? As I began to pursue this question, a second one arose which still eludes an answer: Why had David Schenck, embodying as he did Victorian virtues of hard work, sobriety, and a pious regard for family, preserved the story of a man whose violence and apparent shiftlessness marked him for trouble?[7]

For some time I remained unsure of what to do with this account that ended with a cryptic note penciled at the bottom of the last page: "Hanged 25 May 1860." Although I lacked a detailed knowledge of the historiography of the antebellum South, particularly the research reported in the profession's journals, I could not but believe that I would have heard of this man before now, considering how vividly he both personified and denied stereotypes of southern life. Here was an illiterate transient who, nevertheless, told his story with clarity and persuasion. Here was a poor man who, even so, possessed a wide range of labor skills. Here was a bully who fashioned his story around a framework of unrelenting violence, yet whose tone of voice sounded curiously dispassionate, relating without rancor the string of fights that had characterized his life. In short, here was someone who reflected in many ways the flat image of "po' white trash" but whose life also reminded me of the three-dimensional existence

[6] David Schenck Notebook, "Biography of Edward Icem alias 'Hardaway Bone,'" 23-49, David Schenck Papers, Private Papers, State Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh.

[7] Schenck's sentiments along these themes are freely and repeatedly expressed in the nineteen volumes of his diaries kept throughout most of his life. See the David Schenck Books, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

of students I had known. Could it be possible that this life was unknown to historians, and, if so, what was I going to do about it?

These thoughts were pushed into the background, however, by the more immediate problem of transcribing the document by hand--the photocopying of a bound notebook being prohibitively expensive--and then typing a transcript that I could use for future research. As much time as this enterprise consumed, even more was needed for the systematic reading and reflection needed to make the document mean anything. Slowly, Isham came to possess for me a life that had left its mark in census reports, trial records, newspapers, Schenck's diary, and state supreme court reports. The dilettantism that characterized this aspect of my work still awaited the grace of time brought by a research grant before it could be transformed into something approaching what a professional historian might accomplish. Joining the teacher with the historian required more effort, I came to realize, than what was possible, at least by me, in a daily existence in the public schools. This lesson was unsettling; while one individual might struggle with a measure of success against the demands made by work within a technocratic-industrial system of education, there was little hope that many other teachers would similarly be able to engage in learning more fundamental than what was required for the daily lesson plan.

As vital as having the necessary time for study and reflection, I also needed an historian's model for how Isham's life might be presented to the public. No grand political, military, or diplomatic history could help. Social histories too often reduced individuals to the playthings of historical forces beyond their comprehension, much less control. Quantitative research only diminished the importance of any one individual. In short, I did not know how

Isham could be understood within the confines historians had drawn for what constituted acceptable history. Although I continued to believe that my overall assessment of the historical profession was accurate, the feeling that there was no appropriate social history to which I could turn was more the result of my ignorance about much of the newest research being done.

Edward Isham made two demands on me: to tell his story and to make sense of it. The former task required the latter, especially if the complexities of Isham's seemingly straightforward and brutal life were to be recognized. No historian provided richer possibilities for interpreting Isham than Bertram Wyatt-Brown, whose landmark *Southern Honor* emphasizes how the "ancient ethic" of honor "was the cement that held regional culture together."[8] Although in some ways Isham stood outside of Wyatt-Brown's conception of honor--Isham's "shamelessness," after all, pitted his sense of reputation against the "respectability" of the community which tried him for murder--Wyatt-Brown provided an overarching, interpretive framework within which one individual could be situated.[9] Bereft of either economic security or stable personal relationships, Isham nevertheless possessed a sense of personal honor which demanded that no challenge to his physical prowess, his possession of a woman, or his meager claim to economic survival could go unaddressed. At the same time, he lived far enough outside of the more widely accepted code of honor defining social relationships in the Sherrills Ford community that no one who insulted him, especially a farmer of substance who had denied him a wage decreed as fair by a magistrate, was safe from his ferocity.

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[8] Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) xv.

[9] On shamelessness, see Wyatt-Brown 59, 398-9, 402.

As important as was this framework (the modern historian's findings are too closely tied to specific contexts to lay claim to theory) it paled before two fundamental aspects of Wyatt-Brown's narrative. The first appeared simple enough, but it offered an encouraging rationale for my approach to Isham. "The scholar is dependent upon written records," Wyatt-Brown wrote of the limitations that the historian must acknowledge, "whereas feelings and even the dramas of daily routine often were conveyed by gesture, look, or silence, or words that no one saw fit to write down. We do, however, have an underutilized body of materials--courtroom testimony hidden away in county seats and state repositories."[10] Isham's words would have escaped us if not for the fragments contained in court testimony and, of course, the autobiography Schenck preserved in his notebook, presumably recorded as a lawyer's preparation for defending a hopeless case. In addition, newspaper advertisements for Isham's arrest contain recollections of his physical appearance, mannerisms, and behavior.[11] The kind of documentary evidence that Wyatt-Brown described as "indispensable" to his work had fallen into my lap.[12] To be sure, Isham's story defied broader quantitative analysis. The uniqueness of the sources documenting his life may preclude a detailed comparison with other poor whites living in the antebellum South, and his behavior certainly was too outrageous to be fairly interpreted as typical of his social class, but his story's narrative power allowed for significant questions about violence, transience, economic survival, and societal tensions to be asked, even if they could not be answered definitively.

10 Wyatt-Brown xi.

11 For an example of one newspaper advertisement, see Culclasure, "'I Have Killed a Damned Dog'" 31.

12 Wyatt-Brown xi.

"Storytelling is the oldest form of history," Wyatt-Brown wrote in *Southern Honor*, satisfying "a basic human curiosity to learn how it all came out."[13] Of course, the historian seeks to do more than show how the story came out--crucial is arriving at "an understanding of social structure and the changes and tensions that constantly undermine the walls until they crumble and new ones take their place."[14] Wyatt-Brown suggests that these two reasons, ancient and modern, for telling stories are separate from each other, whereas in truth stories explain the world they inhabit as well as they satisfy curiosity about endings. Nevertheless, Wyatt-Brown's persuasive utilization of narrative testified to the hold a story can exert on the historian's imagination.

Still, the question lingered as to how much could be made of an anonymous life. Carl Bridenbaugh, in "Violence and Virtue in Virginia, 1766; or, The Importance of the Trivial," had shown how the seeming triviality of a colonial murder case, when "examined in connection with other contemporary events of historical importance . . . assumes an unrecognized significance."[15] The crime of Colonel John Chiswell killing the drunken merchant Robert Routledge in a tavern at Cumberland Court House assumes a significance beyond the sensationalism of the event, especially as it occurred at a time when nascent public opinion in Virginia was increasingly critical of an aristocratic ruling class besieged by the Stamp Act crisis. "This unfortunate incident furnishes posterity with a richly detailed case history revealing just exactly how an aristocracy acts when it is in danger or merely threatened. Among themselves aristocrats will be

[13] Wyatt-Brown xiv.

[14] Wyatt-Brown xiv.

[15] Carl Bridenbaugh, "Violence and Virtue in Virginia, 1766; or, The Importance of the Trivial" in *Early Americans*, ed. Carl Bridenbaugh (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) 211.

democratic, . . . but they always present a solid, silent phalanx to the rest of society whether their cause be just or unjust, good or bad, right or wrong."[16] Routledge, however, had a following of those who wanted to see Chiswell prosecuted, and Chiswell was an influential man whose aristocratic friends resisted seeing one of their own brought before the bar. The murder, at least by the light of the times, was hardly an obscure one. Did Isham's less-debated crime similarly reveal barely concealed tensions in antebellum culture?

That a murder could reveal a societal fault line offered a way of understanding what happened when the transient laborer Edward Isham knifed the slaveholding farmer James Cornelius. This killing in particular threatened an established social order with frightening consequences, especially as it was conducted in the presence of slaves (none of whom, of course, could testify in court to what they had seen). Isham's subsequent capture was aided by the offer of a substantial reward and the printing of handbills, some of which reached Tennessee by stagecoach just as Isham arrived there. It appeared that little expense would be spared to secure the murderer's arrest.

Cornelius was not the first victim to die at Isham's hand. In fact, Isham had assumed his alias of Hardaway Bone when he fled Alabama, where he had fired a shotgun into the chest of a man with whom he had a running feud. Jim Runnels, the victim, however, was of Isham's social class. Although Isham had found it necessary to flee Alabama, he showed no concern that he might be tracked down over such a distance. The evidence is thin, but it suggests that greater resources were brought to bear after Cornelius's murder than Runnels's. Isham's outrageous behavior knew no bounds, but when his actions crossed an important social class line, he was more than just chased out of state; he was also

[16] Bridenbaugh 211.

arrested, prosecuted, and punished. The murder assumed a greater significance because it dramatized the plight of being poor and white in the antebellum South.

Other historians were also turning their attention to the obscure and finding a greater significance. In *Celia, A Slave*, Melton A. McLaurin premised his research on the argument "that the personal and the political are never separate entities."[17] McLaurin recounted the 1855 killing by a Missouri slave named Celia of her sexually abusive master, John Newsom. Despite Celia's gruesome disposal of Newsom's body by burning it in the fireplace of her cabin, her crime was quickly discovered and she was brought to trial. The killing of a prominent and respected farmer by one of his slaves would seem to present little difficulty to her prosecution. As her chief lawyer, John Jameson, realized, however, nothing was easy in an atmosphere charged with the increasingly moral debate over slavery that was generated by the Kansas-Nebraska Act. If slaves were not supposed to kill their masters, neither were their masters, operating within an institution boasted as benevolent, supposed to rape their slaves. Celia's case provided incontrovertible evidence that both had happened, and the moral implications raised by incidents like this one discomforted a slaveholding society increasingly called upon to defend its practice.

McLaurin's belief that "the lives of lesser figures, men and women who lived and died in virtual anonymity, often better illustrate certain aspects of the major issues than do the lives of those who, through significant achievement, the appeal of the orator, or the skill of the polemicist, achieve national

[17] Melton A. McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1991) xi.

prominence."[18] This argument helped me to look anew at Isham and ponder the exact circumstances of his crime. Rarely, if ever, had Isham interacted in meaningful ways with prominent citizens; not surprisingly, his circle of acquaintances tended to be in similar circumstances. At the same time, there seemed to be an easy familiarity between Isham and Cornelius.

On the Sunday morning of his death, James Cornelius, as he washed for church, spotted Isham approaching his house, whereupon he invited him (according to Isham) to come in. Austin Cornelius later testified at Isham's trial that his dying brother had told him he felt no fear of Isham. Even so, here he was standing in the presence of a man whom he had refused to pay for digging ditches on his farm, even going so far as staying a magistrate's decision awarding Isham most of what he had asked for--the result of what must have been the only legal action Isham ever willingly undertook! What kind of unspoken social relationship existed between the two that allowed the prosperous farmer to hail the common laborer, or enabled the cheated worker to directly confront the niggardly landowner? If, as historians have argued in recent years, antebellum society was rent with class resentment that the travail of the Civil War exacerbated,[19] then perhaps Isham can also be seen as someone whose life of "exploitation, hardships and repression," in E. P. Thompson's words, "continually exposes the text of paternalist theatre to ironic criticism and (less frequently) to revolt."[20] There is good reason to balance a view of Isham as acting out of his own, idiosyncratic rage with one that also asks what it meant to be a

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[18] McLaurin xi.

[19] For a recent treatment of the theme of class resentment, see Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1994).

[20] Thompson 11.

poor white struggling for economic survival in the antebellum South.

Historians, then, were providing examples of how isolated actions might possess important hidden meanings. And, to my delight, I was discovering how fashionable it had become for them to admit to storytelling. John Demos, for example, says in *The Unredeemed Captive*–his account of the 1704 adoption of a Puritan minister's captive daughter by a Mohawk family who lived at a Jesuit mission-fort near Montreal--"Most of all, I wanted to write a *story*" (author's emphasis).[21] By contrast, Simon Schama, in *Landscape and Memory*, sought to extend the sense of childhood wonder he experienced from reading Rudyard Kipling's story *Puck of Pook's Corner*–filled with visions of the peoples who across the ages had stood on the same spot of land--to a belief that landscape's scenery "is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock."[22] Both historians depended on narrative to recover memories nearly lost, yet both also wanted to tie their work to the modern world. For Demos, the connection came by recognizing how his tale of seventeenth century captivity resonated with our experiences of Tehran, Lebanon, various "hijackings," and Patty Hearst. Like the experience of the abducted Eunice Williams and her family, our "contact across the lines of race and culture remains a lively, often painful, theme in our modern 'global village.'"[23] The attitude taken by Schama is, if anything, more direct, as he expresses the hope that his journey "may help us keep faith with a future on this tough, lovely old planet."[24]

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[21] John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994) xi.

[22] Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995) 7.

[23] Demos xii.

[24] Schama 19.

Storytelling, then, is rarely an idle undertaking, and, as my research grew, I returned to a question that had lingered from my first encounter with Edward Isham: Why was this man, apparently someone with few redeeming qualities, so compelling an individual that I wanted to tell his story? Isham was many things: a fighter and golddigger in Georgia, a gambler in Tennessee, a cattledriver in Alabama, a railsplitter in Arkansas and a farmer in North Carolina, but never was he so garish and cartoonish a figure as Jeeter Lester, the poor white cropper of *Tobacco Road*. Isham somehow maintained an identity that, if it did not make him a sympathetic figure, at least prompted consideration of what lay behind his viciousness.

The single evidence that best persuades me of Isham's humanity came from late in my research, although it nicely reprises his life's turmoil. In his autobiography, Isham tells of a wife he took in North Carolina. Schenck recorded her name as Mandy Lesley, daughter of James Lesley; she is probably the Amanda Lasley listed in the 1850 federal census report for Iredell County.[25] Mandy became pregnant by Isham--now called Hardaway Bone--but she died at the time their child was born. Other than commenting that his child was staying at the home of the Reed family, Isham said nothing more about the infant, omitting even a reference to gender.

The daughter, as other sources revealed, outlived her father by many years. William and Susan Reed were left with little choice but to keep the child born of a mother who never knew her and a father who was hanged. In the 1860 federal census, taken in Catawba County a few weeks after Isham's execution, the Reed family counted six children in their household, including the one-year-

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[25] Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Iredell County, North Carolina, Population Schedule.

old girl named Margaret Bone.[26] Ten years later, with the next federal census, the family had moved to neighboring Iredell County: Margaret was still living with William and Susannah Reid, while son James Reid and his family lived in the adjoining household.[27]

It is the report of the 1880 federal census, however, that most pointedly records Edward Isham's legacy. At this time, Margaret Boone, as she was then listed, appeared as a young woman aged twenty-two and living in the household of thirty-three year old James Reid (neither William nor Susan appearing in the report).[28] Two questions were used in this census that had not been incorporated into earlier ones. The first asked where each household member's father had been born. The second asked for the relationship between the listed individual and the head of the household. The responses show that Margaret's father had been born in Georgia and that she was a boarder in the Reid household.

Perhaps too much can be read into these laconic statements of fact. At the same time, they pose an inescapable poignancy. Margaret Bone, carrying Isham's alias through her life , knew of her father's birthplace; did she not also know, therefore, of his restless life and ignoble death? She would have known no parents other than the Reeds, and, yet, twenty years after she came into their home, and having grown up with their children, she was described as a boarder. Edward Isham appeared to be at ease only in the rough-and-tumble region of the Georgia frontier, although, even there, he was constantly at odds with someone.

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[26] Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Catawba County, North Carolina, Population Schedule.

[27] Ninth Census of the United States, 1870: Iredell County, North Carolina, Population Schedule.

[28] Tenth Census of the United States, 1880: Iredell County, North Carolina, Population Schedule.

Always the outsider, the loner, the unwanted visitor, Isham inadvertently seemed to pass along his most notable characteristic to his daughter. Was she, too, the outsider, an individual who could never escape the memories other people had of the bad man she could not remember?

I have known this child, as, indeed, I realized that I have known something of her father. Part of Isham's strangeness to a modern audience results from our inability to understand what it is like to live so marginalized an existence. To historians and teachers alike, sharing as they do middle class ties, the combination of Isham's behavior, raising images of stereotypical poor white behavior, and the fact that his life is carefully recorded in his own voice, a preoccupation most usually of the middle class, strikes us as incongruous, even unsettling. As a teacher, however, I heard his voice echo in familiar ways in the voices of many of the children who have sat in my classroom.

Although I am not aware of a student ever having threatened me, and I have not witnessed personally the kind of destructiveness Isham wrought, I have been in the presence of children whom I suspected were never heard. They may have yelled with their lives, living in apparent defiance of everyone around them, or they may have lived in sullen silence, but they were regarded both by parents and society at large as unneeded and unwanted. Some of them responded remarkably, even pathetically, to whatever extra attention I could offer as one of their teachers, while others seemed too far away in their thoughts for me to reach. They were the result of indifference or a misplaced attention that focused more on the needs of their parents. I felt as if I had seen something of their lives in the life of Edward Isham. Over and again I wondered what chance Isham had in life when, as a child, he came home from school crying to his father

that he had been beaten by a boy who had held him by his hair, only to find his father respond by cutting off his locks so that he might be more likely to whip his opponent. If anything, Margaret Bone may have had an even lesser chance, her mother dead, her father repeatedly drunk in the few months he was with her, and she growing up knowing him only through the ugly account told her.

This is not simply the harrowing account of a father's dissolution; neither is this a maudlin story about a little match girl who, in this instance, failed to see her angelic mother in the dying glow of a struck match. Behind the scream of rage that was his life is Isham's voice, as level in tone as the detached voice of his autobiography. The man who constantly "got into a difficulty," as he euphemistically described his fights, was an individual for whom life itself was a difficulty.[29] With his gold mining, his lumber cutting, his cattedriving, his gambling, his beekeeping, his farming, he indirectly asks us how well we could survive in a world whose economy insured our marginality. Inured to a life in which the best fighter was the best man, Isham causes us to reflect on how we define honor. Having turned to the court for a redress of his grievances, only to find that influence had blocked his way, Isham makes us ponder the certainty of justice.

All this does not mean that Edward Isham was simply the unwitting victim of forces he could not control. He is not, after all, representative of the quiet and truly anonymous, if at times equally desperate, lives of poor whites in the antebellum South. Isham's poverty and transience were reinforced by his tendency toward violence, a personal characteristic so constantly exhibited that it marked him even in a region noted for the fierceness of its people. Only when we

[29] For example, "I got into a difficulty with a negro about a fishing pole and tried to cut him but was prevented, for this they turned me out of the church." Schenck Notebook 24.

embrace a sense of contingency--that is, a belief in "historical events as a series of real choices that living people actually made," as David Hackett Fischer has defined it--can narrative have the power to move us with its uncertainty.[30] Isham may have careened across the South during his brief life, but the incident that brought him to the gallows was not inevitable. Instead, it was contingent upon a string of coincident events--a wife's death, the loss of a crop, a decline into unrelieved drunkenness, and the staying of a magistrate's order--that prompted a calculated decision to assault Cornelius.

For me, the narrative tension of Isham's life was palpable because I have seen how adolescence often represents for young people a last opportunity, perhaps increasingly tenuous given our hyperkinetic pushing of children into the stresses and vices that afflict us, to secure an identity with which they can comfortably live. With too many students, I was never sure what identity had formed inside the outward defensive gestures that protect us from one another, which may not have mattered to studying the past, except that I could not separate what we learned from who the learners were. Similarly, I was able to read Isham's account and easily wonder what kind of individual lay behind his frightful persona. For this reason alone, Edward Isham, the poor white laborer, deserved the attention that his contemporaries more readily afforded Hardaway Bone, the convicted killer.

Ultimately, my understanding of Isham depended on understanding myself as teacher. Storytelling should come easy for teachers, even one at a high school studying with adolescents who have only just grown out of childhood. If historians in recent years have felt the pull towards narrative as a way to escape

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[30] David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) xv and note 4, 375.

the abstractness, false certainty, and relentless inevitability imposed by numbers, then I felt a need to show--perhaps to me, most of all--that as a teacher I also fashion narrative to create a sense of the past.

The difference between the roles of historian and teacher, unfortunately, is the difference between the creation of knowledge and the transmission of culture. However, what most immediately concerned me was not what the resulting hierarchy these differing roles might signify, or even why teaching has been so enervated of playful creativity, but how the roles might be combined.

What seemed important for me at first was capitalizing on a historical find by publishing a formal historical treatise. Only as I was well along in this work did I realize the depths of dissatisfaction I felt as a public school history teacher. Henry Giroux has described the importance of teachers acting as "transformative intellectuals," that is, as actively assuming "responsibility for raising serious questions about what they teach, how they are to teach, and what the larger goals are for which they are striving."[31] With Edward Isham, I was engaged in work that was both enjoyable and meaningful, and yet which did not appear to fit easily in my classroom responsibilities. Isham (or anything I could relate to him) did not fit into any of the curriculum objectives; nor would he be of help with an end-of-course examination. Becoming apparent was the realization that, as a teacher, I had surprisingly little role in deciding what I did in my classroom.

Teachers rarely are expected to address fundamental issues in education--the educational psychologist speaks to issues of child development, the administrator defines how public concerns are addressed and the bureaucrat determines course content. Classroom teachers are left with devising gaming

[31] Henry A. Giroux, *Teachers As Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning* (South Hadley, Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey, 1990) 126.

strategies for implementing the curriculum objectives they have been handed, which is safe enough work for the women, coaches, and local history buffs who fill public school history departments (not to denigrate these individuals, who have the stamina--or, occasionally, dullness--to survive the relentless din of boosting test score achievement and preparing students for the job market). Considering the part-time, womanly world out of which the public schools grew, and the assembly-line, factory worker world in which they received their modern cast, it is not surprising that the teacher's experience has been largely ignored. At the same time, if "women/worker" teachers are left with little responsibility for deciding how their subject should be presented, the reason for their disempowerment may also have much to do with how history is perceived.

As understood in the public school setting, culture has been, using Michael Apple's description, "commodified," instead of based on the continuous struggle embodied in lived experience.[32] Heaven knows public education, already the battleground for conflicting interests about what is good for society, has ample reason for refusing to define education as anything more than providing background information or communication skills. Because we define ourselves through our past, history provides a supreme arena for controversy over how to transmit a cultural understanding of who we, a diverse people, are. We pretend, however, that we can talk of the past as if it were a lifeless object detached from ourselves. When the past is ordered by historical era with at least a nod to every major topic within an unbroken continuum, there is little chance for realizing what Walter Benjamin has asserted is the present's "unique

[32] Michael W. Apple, *Education and Power* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983) 74.

experience with the past."[33] All our todays (and the facts with which they are crammed) meld with our yesterdays, stretching eternally into the past, except that they are better days, and appended in updated chapters at the end of the book. We fail to ask how the uniqueness of our times might direct our inquiries into times past; instead, we rely on the mere chronicling of events. No wonder students accuse history of being boring. Sensing how we neuter the past by presenting it as an uninterrupted stream leading to the present, they respond to it in the same manner in which they treat a grandparent's homily about the old days, with occasional amusement at the quaint tales and frequent contempt when called to be thankful. Do we hesitate to converse with the past because we agree with Walter Benjamin that the past's claim upon us cannot be settled cheaply?[34]

Public education surely must fear to confront any historical problem that eludes an answer or elicits paradox or encourages debate. That identity is not fixed, but must be refined in the heat of our controversy with the past, is a suggestion that is at odds with a public school system predicated upon arriving at consensus. History as taught in public schools offers us problems that, like those in advertising, are easily resolved by proper dosage of the democratic spirit. Squeezed out of this formula is the sense that the past itself is rife with tension and, moreover, exists in tension with the present. How can we tell a tale of antebellum poverty and violence without thinking of--indeed, without our story being influenced by--reflection upon our culture's poverty and violence? To forego exploring the ways in which we understand the past as we write its

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[33] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 262.

[34] Benjamin 254.

history means that our stories are less honest, less probing, less forthrightly revealing of ourselves as well as our predecessors than they might be. Our lived experiences require us to converse with, not simply address or listen to, the past with which we are tied.

Part of my motivation in this undertaking, therefore, sprang from the desire to demonstrate my belief that the teacher as historian could bring to the public school classroom skills and insights that would aid students in thinking of knowledge and their learning as organic, not static. How, for example, does the documentation of Isham's life challenge what we think we know about the past? From this point, we can begin to ask specific questions about Isham--his labor or his relations with women or black southerners, as examples--that would guide our study. The creative process of engaging an historical personage is important, not for fostering an appreciation of antebellum history, but because it reveals how we choose what we say of the past, the source of our truths about who we are.

"[T]he truths that mean most to us must always be uttered by halves," warns a nobleman to the young protagonist in Umberto Eco's seventeenth-century setting of *The Island of the Day Before*.[35] Such worldly caution turns to more deadly evil, however, when we pretend our half-truths possess certainty about a past we can never know with completeness. Perhaps more than access to the information revolution, students need to understand how knowledge, embedded with our values, is always in flux, representing as it does our restless creativity. My grand hope was that the example of one teacher bringing the imagination he could to one small historical problem might cause a student to

[35] Umberto Eco, *The Island of the Day Before* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995) 112.

see learning as unexpectedly liberating of his or her creative energies.

Also involved in this undertaking was my sympathy for the voice of one who had been ignored, as best he could be, both in his lifetime and for years afterward. Isham represented a fleeting image of the past that threatened "to disappear irretrievably" if "not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns."[36] There is a difference between observing that Isham was an obscure individual in his day and believing that he deserves this status in our own. The difference lies in the consideration that Isham speaks to concerns we hold, even if his contemporaries did not. Not only does he tell us something of a poor white's experience in the antebellum South; his story strikes sympathetic tones in an era when poverty, violence, and transience are increasingly evident and bear the tones of tension between social classes and racial groupings. Isham's life allows the historian "to brush history against the grain," in Benjamin's striking phrase, because it observes that the "anonymous toil" of laborers, not to mention enslaved people, were required to support the civilization the artifacts and accomplishments of which have received the greater attention.[37]

My research drew on the work of historians who have recognized the web of social, economic, and political relations that defined life in the antebellum South. The history I had taught in the classroom, however, so emphasized a chain of being in which causes and events comprised the links that there was no place for asking how and why the chain had been fashioned in the first place. I understood, of course, how this approach fit with the history of a nation described as "triumphant," in which hegemony was as unchallengeable as the answers to the course's multiple choice tests. However, this view of history did

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[36] Benjamin 255.

[37] Benjamin 256-7.

not square with what I found at school, at least in the classes filled with the children of hosiery and furniture workers, where students took little interest in a subject that appeared to be so remote from their existence. Unable to find meaning for their lives in the stories told them, the students concluded that history was yet another instrument of control over them, a conclusion that had also become increasingly difficult for me to escape.

What I had not encountered in my teaching experience was someone who could describe their life so simply and clearly, if chillingly, as Isham. Did he have anything to say that might make a life of economic insignificance and personal alienation easier to understand? Could what I had experienced as a teacher help render Isham in human colors that were warmer than the cold facts of his crime? Should Isham's story be brought to my students, perhaps they might see that not only could they create history, they were also the stuff of history.

Students were the stuff of history in one fundamental way: their lives were commentary on the past. In a culture that prides itself on embodying beliefs in equality and opportunity, the lived experiences of students testified to the degree those promises have gone unfulfilled. Not being included in the imperfect examples of the social construction called history does not disallow students from arguing with the past. To cast themselves as hopeless "products" of a deterministic history required a surrender of part of their humanity which insists upon choice. While many students may never feel a connection with the famous and powerful of their textbooks, they can, nevertheless, ask questions of them. Once they begin to exhibit "courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude" in asking why their lives are ordered the way they are, students "will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers."[38] They may, on occasion,

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[38] Benjamin 254.

find that the answers more complex than wooden exploitative or cynical conspiratorial theories might suggest, but the "critical apprehension of our real existing lives" can steer them away from the "empty moralism" and "sterile scienticism" that plague public education.[39]

But deeper by far than these factors, and, finally, what moved me most, was a desire to secure an identity for myself that would confirm a wavering belief that I could engage in significant, creative work, even as I had to accept the grim realities of employment in a public school. I needed to affirm a belief that my work was important in the intellectual ways that mattered to me, and that I was not simply too late or too lazy or too unfortunate to be a member of academia, where "real" intellectual work takes place. Public schools, embodying so much of our culture's ambivalence about both learning and children, are not a likely place to find such assurance. Neither are universities, which often seem to view the public schools as wards from which the lucky few will escape to find enlightenment on their campuses.

Faith in the creative intelligence of young people, and my own, however, required a tangible demonstration if it was to remain honest. All points in the past are equidistant to our culture's interest in freedom, equality, opportunity, security, community, and individuality in that they can each show us how these issues have been understood (which is not to deny that some eras place the issues in greater relief). Despite his obscurity, Edward Isham's short, frenzied existence had something to say about these issues. Significance and obscurity, in fact, are not antonymous--the former representing a value judgment made by the present on the past. Learning to make those judgments for oneself is perhaps an

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[39] Svi Shapiro, *Between Capitalism and Democracy: Educational Policy and the Crisis of the Welfare State* (South Hadley, Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey, 1990) 27.

education's most difficult lesson. Apart from all the curricula guides, it also remains of primary importance for the public school teacher, who remains the great generalist in education, and hopes that lessons of making judgment have broader applicability in evaluating society.

A student in a public school may never be asked to consider whether or not something has significance. They must rely, instead, on what they are told on the authority of others, whether they be the teacher, the textbook authors, or the designers of the course of study. Young people already ask about the relevance of their studies, at least if they have not been so panicked by their economic prospects as to accept whatever they are told must be done if they are to succeed. What they lack, and what a society adrift needs so desperately, are teachers who can lead them in examining their lives in the context of their culture in order to explore the interaction between the two. Both individual and culture are the descendants of countless choices made, willingly or unwillingly, knowingly and unknowingly. The history of one individual, and how that history was created, can serve as a beginning point for an extended dialogue about who we are.

Teachers, unfortunately, are so harried by the increasingly unrelenting demands both of students who have been discarded by others and a system of education struggling to retain public support that they must struggle to raise serious questions about what they do. Indeed, were public education fearful of inquiring teachers it could scarcely better insure that such queries were not raised. The closed system that is public education, in which teaching, learning, and testing form a self-referencing circle of schooling, is well insulated from questions about how we know what is important. As these questions often elude definitive answers, asking them assumes greater importance, yet it is this

tentativeness and a willingness to admit the limits of our knowledge that public education finds so hard to accept.

Ultimately, a teacher who seriously pursues questions of purpose and meaning finds inspiration outside of education's professional circles. Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that the Sabbath makes sacred *time*, or history, and not *space*, or place. The Sabbath, therefore, helps us displace the coveting of things in space with the coveting of things in time.[40] The historian reaches across time to find someone who both resembles and differs from ourselves. Coveting this knowledge may bring miraculous creations in which we feel almost at one with the past, so intimately do we feel its closeness. Like the sacred, however, we can never fully know the past, and so our sense of accomplishment is tinged with wistfulness.

We feel that we know the profane Edward Isham not simply because we have so many details of his life, but because we can recognize his life among our own. Compassion lies at the heart of teaching. Without it, the teacher dispenses with the one attribute most needed for an individual to reach out to another in the hope that learning will enrich living. When brought to the historian's work, compassion helps forestall the treating of a historical personage as a "subject," evidence of the scientism that reduces people to objects and elevates the inquirer to omniscience.

Left unresolved, and perhaps incapable of being resolved, is the question of whether a story like Isham's tells us more about the historical period being studied or the one to which the story is being addressed. My suspicion is that historians would emphasize the importance of the former while assuming the

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[40] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951) 90-1.

risk of not adequately exploring the significance of the latter. I know that his story would have been told differently, assuming that it was told, had other attitudes, experiences, and talents been brought to bear. In such ways we become a part of the stories we tell, and they a part of us. Remembering our tangled, sometimes unspoken, and even unrecognized connections with our stories saves us from the hubris of thinking we can know all.

CHAPTER III

TEACHER AS APOSTLE OF DANGEROUS MEMORY

Despite the amount of information lost to us, staggering heaps of documents from the nineteenth century still exist and can be found in the most ordinary of places. Consider, for example, a scrap of paper found at a flea market that once was part of the store accounts kept by Henry M. Mills of Granite Hill in Iredell County, North Carolina, bearing this scrawled message: "Marche 14 57 lete cela hav too pears of scus. . . ." The note was signed by R. K. Henry, and Mills added to the bottom, "I sent 1 pr. shoes $1.50 March 14th 1857." In the context of similar messages found in the same cardboard box, this request for shoes was carried from the farmer to the storekeeper by a slave. Adam A. McNeely asked Mills that his "boy Sam" be allowed a hat charged to his account; T. P. Gillespie requested that "too dollars"on his account be given to the "boy Garrison"; and Theos. Allison desired that "if they is iney letter in the office" it be sent by the unnamed boy, Allison adding that "if that big jar aint gon to day lay it away for me till I come down."[1]

Notes likes these lend a human touch to an inhumane institution. Unlike in census reports, the slaves mentioned in the notes often are named. The

[1] The notes are in the possession of the author. They are dated as follows: Adam A. McNeely, January 3, 1857; T. P. Gillespie, October 25, 1856; and Theos. Allison, August 29, 1857. Henry Mills is listed in the Federal Census of 1860 as an unmarried merchant, aged twenty-nine, living with a four-year-old boy and owning $1,000 of real property. The note writers are not so readily identifiable. Theo Allison, however, does make an appearance in the 1860 Federal Census as a thirty-nine-year-old farmer living near the Granite Hill Post Office and owning real estate valued at $2,000 and personal property at $420. Of the five slaves he owned (and who lived in one house), four were women. The fifth, a fourteen-year-old boy, is listed as a fugitive from the state. Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Iredell County, North Carolina, Population and Slave Schedules.

everyday needs of sometimes barely literate masters are communicated. The function of a storekeeper is illustrated. True, life's essence is gone from the notes. Was the "boy Sam" really a child, and was Garrison sent because he was trustworthy and liked by his master, and did any of these individuals--slave, master, or storekeeper--reflect on their relationships with each other? Despite what they do not tell us, however, these scraps of information encourage inquiry into how a community distributed power to create a way of life. Most of all, they remind us what is easy to forget in an era more attuned with totalitarian politics: the practice of slavery involved people who knew each other, sometimes intimately, and who lived with each other in a complex web of relationships that, while incomprehensible to us in some ways, nevertheless involved familiar issues of power.

While it would perhaps be unfair to expect such a small scale to be the sole one used in history textbooks, the impersonal way in which most public school texts treat the issue of slavery, so central to an understanding of our past, is torturing. Not that textbooks ignore the institution, but what they emphasize is the political controversy generated by its practice. The everyday world inhabited by slaves, masters, and merchants is shunted in favor of a political realm dominated by the famed and influential. Because of the caution with which textbooks are written--they must be adopted, after all, by political agencies that are hypersensitive to public controversy--detailed descriptions of slavery are avoided apparently on the assumption that discussion of past wrongs promotes present divisions. Instead of stories about power and survival, hope and anguish, relationship and community, we are left with encyclopedic entries devoid of human passion. Even the most sophisticated textbooks rarely go beyond issues of

historiography--what the famed and influential intellectuals have said about the subject--to teach students how they might approach a past world which continues to influence the culture in which they live. Connections between past and present are left ambiguous, and societal relationships are defined only in terms of the formal institutions that rest upon subterranean arrangements of power.

In *American Voices*, for example, a respectable textbook commonly found in public high schools, four paragraphs are devoted to describing how slavery worked, matched exactly by the same number of paragraphs outlining life in the industrial North. These paragraphs are followed by three entire sections composed of many paragraphs that trace the political treatment of slavery in the period between the Mexican War and the election of 1860.[2] To be sure, what was said in the four paragraphs reflected sound scholarship and a compassionate tone: "Treatment of slaves varied widely--from paternal and benign to incredibly cruel--but in all cases slaves were considered to be pieces of property, not people."[3] Nevertheless, the presence of common people is noticeably absent--the illustrations and the one supplemental reading at the end of the chapter that features a former slave's memory of her mother only partially overcome the anonymity with which the text treats the topic.[4] The authors may have succeeded in avoiding a detailed description of slavery's more painful aspects, but they have failed to help students understand how thoroughly this arrangement of social, economic, and political relationships defined everyday life in this era. Vibrant historical communities that students might compare with the ones in

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[2] Berkin et al. 186-93.

[3] Berkin et al. 186.

[4] Berkin et al. 202-03.

which they live do not exist.

Most tellingly absent is an open-ended consideration of how a culture that feverishly enshrined the tenants of the Declaration of Independence could simultaneously and unblushingly claim the right to own human beings. The point in asking this question is not to condemn the culture; few enterprises are more foolish that upbraiding the dead for failing to share the righteousness of the living. In fact, the point is to do exactly what most textbooks and, by extension, the public schools that depend upon them, most fear: to ask of the present, with its unfulfilled promises, how it came to be. We recognize that the present cannot answer without reference to the past, hence the purpose of history. When we call upon the past as witness to its experiences, we may be surprised by the clarity of its speech, as T. S. Eliot understood (in what might be an epitaph for Edward Isham):

> And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
> They can tell you, being dead: the communication
> Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the
> living.[5]

What the poet explicitly understood, and what the textbook implicitly recognizes, is that the communication of the dead is dangerous because it challenges our presuppositions of a past too static, too detached, to have much relation to present-day circumstances. The dead will talk with tongues of fire when we understand that they are talking to us, not to each other, with voices that tell of the promise, fulfillment, and disappointment they once knew, voices that their contemporaries may have ignored but which speak to us of the

[5] T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," I, in *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1943) 51.

injustice and oppression that have tragically accompanied our nation's promise of freedom and opportunity.

Behind the textbook's political caution lies a subtler, more insidious message about the relationship between student, text, and subject. Despite its superior scholarship in a variety of historical fields (and its lofty title is ably underwritten by several important American historians), this textbook emphasizes for students a political history. There is an irony about the political safeness of relating a political history. Past political controversies, no matter how divisive and significant, usually appear remote to the everyday world of people who live in the present and without much access to power. A textbook might more comfortably relate the deeds of a great statesman, or the debate surrounding a piece of legislation, or the rise of a new political party--examples that can neatly be objectified for the purposes of measuring student "achievement"--than it can the social constructions that allocated, in ways that were often resistant to change, freedom, justice and opportunity. Instead, political histories tend to concentrate on the people who were used to dealing with power in controversies that are given clearly defined beginnings and endings. Of course, the past's reality was different, with political leaders working in a world that was replete with human uncertainty, inconsistency, and contingency. The tentativeness of much of what they did and the less easily discernible web of relationships out of which they operated, however, escape the textbook's narrative. Little room is left for ambiguity, much less paradox, because of the expectation of arriving at "lessons" that will make straight our paths in the present.

Textbooks only replicate our own hesitancy to raise questions about race, class, gender, work, faith, community, or any other concern that might challenge students to search out their rootedness in the past by asking how these matters have been understood both yesterday and today. Instead, we expect young people to be concerned with individuals whose lives seem as removed from their own as frock coats and hoop skirts from blue jeans and birkenstocks or--perhaps more to the point--the political leaders of our own time. While not denigrating the importance of either a chronology of events or historians' differing interpretations of their significance, our histories must also allow for the past's transcendent claim upon the present to be felt. The stories upon which we concentrate should be like our lives in the degree of complexity and uncertainty they exhibit. Most of all, they should educe questions of why relationships are defined as they are, questions that are important to ask if we are to decide whether to accept the past's legacy or to demand that the present be lived differently.

Textbooks, of course, are only one means to the end of encouraging students to root their identity in an understanding of the past. They cannot substitute for the personal interaction that occurs between teacher and student, as demonstrated by one unexpected moment when a lifetime of experience flashed by in an instant. The moment came at the end of the school year, a time which often evokes sentimentality from students. The comment one student made on a last day of class, however, left me pondering its meaning for long afterward. Pausing as she was leaving the classroom, the student thanked me "for telling it like it is." Her construction clearly used the present tense, even though she was referring to a history course (one in which students had

examined the storekeeper notes cited earlier). She was gone before I could ask her to explain, but since then I wondered if she sensed something that at the time I did not. "What oppressed people understand better than most," observed Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, "is that intellectuals are typically servants of the mighty; they often provide the legitimacy for deeds of state, private violence, and exploitation."[6] Inasmuch as the teaching of history tends either to overwhelm with trivialities or to confirm the existing order--the former, in fact, may be a way of succeeding in the latter--the student had good reason for having doubted the past's relevance to her life. In this class, however, we had talked of history with a view of identifying how it had shaped, for good or ill, the present. Our assumption was that understanding who we are, individually and collectively, depended upon a sense of rootedness in the past. The history we tried to tell (weakly, to be sure) depended more upon conversation with the past than revelation by it. The answers we arrived at, when we did, sometimes satisfied us and occasionally left us uncomfortable. Nevertheless, we sensed that looking into ourselves also required that we look outwardly to each other--none of our alienation was so great as to deny the relationships that bound us together in communities situated in time.

And what was it that we talked with the past about? Throughout *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot meditates upon the relation between past and present:

> Footfalls echo in the memory
> Down the passage which we did not take
> Towards the door we never opened
> Into the rose-garden.[7]

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[6] Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux, "Schooling, Culture, and Literacy in the Age of Broken Dreams: A Review of Bloom and Hirsch," *Harvard Educational Review* 58 (April 1988): 178.

[7] Eliot, "Burnt Norton," I, 13.

To root an identity in the past means to ask of contingencies pursued, and left unpursued, and to consider choices made, or left unmade. Our purpose is not to enter a world of speculation about what might have been but to be conscious of how our moment in the present was shaped. Accepting a history text without expecting the past to be able to speak in alternative ways means accepting the arrangements of power it offers as the only ones conceivable--political leaders truly in control, common people rendered as anonymous masses, complex communities reduced to terse paragraphs, all swept along by the steady and unbroken march of events. We are less in need of liberation from the past which brought us into being than from the histories which limit what we can know by drowning us with facts at the expense of meaning as related through narrative.

"Only through time time is conquered," Eliot wrote of how the past cannot be remembered except as we reference ourselves to it.[8] The histories related by others will assign us, if we allow them, an identity that separates us from the past that, in Walter Benjamin's memorable image, expected our coming.[9] As soon as we are disconnected from the past, we are left adrift in the present, susceptible to believing that the world is immutable. Walter Benjamin described the past as possessing "a *weak* Messianic power," hence the past's claim on us.[10] To study the past with the view of tracing the processes that frame our existence *redeems* (hence the past's Messianic power, which is weak because we can choose to ignore it) us from the strictures of the present. Identities evolve over time, encompassing the experiences of a lifetime and the predispositions fostered by earlier ones, and cannot, therefore, be formulated for us by others.

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[8] Eliot, "Burnt Norton," II, 16.

[9] Benjamin 254.

[10] Benjamin 252.

The past is alive with a cacophony of voices which will not be heard except that we assume the burden of soliciting them to speak.

Conjuring the past is risky, assuming that we want history to force an examination of how we live in the present. If we do, then we will seek out in particular those stories that challenge our assumptions about how life can, and should, be lived. Johann-Baptist Metz describes these stories as "dangerous memories," by which he refers to the

> memories that make demands on us. These are memories in which earlier experiences break through to the center point of our lives and reveal new and dangerous insights for the present. They illuminate for a few moments and with a harsh steady light the questionable nature of things we have apparently come to terms with, and show up the banality of our supposed "realism."[11]

There is in Metz's description a sense of the transitory moment, comparable to Benjamin's comment about the weakness of the past's Messianic power. These memories have not simply been forgotten; they have been subjected to the desire to be forever banished by power arrangements that find them inconveniently disquieting. Bringing them to our attention is neither an easy nor a popular task, but as teachers we have little choice but to do so if we believe that education frees us to effect change in the world. We do not hold all these stories ourselves, nor can we tell them all, but we can engage our students to possess for themselves enough dangerous memory for them to decide how they want to live in the world.

The praxis for our liberation, however, does not come easily in a time when genuine self-identity, rooted in the past, is so difficult to create, as

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[11] Johann-Baptist Metz, "The Future in the Memory of Suffering," in Johann-Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann, *Faith and the Future: Essays on Theology, Solidarity, and Modernity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995) 7-8.

demonstrated with an illustration also drawn from experience in the classroom.[12] As he entered the class, the student handed me a worn, cheaply printed pamphlet with evident pride, for he had made an historical discovery unmentioned in the textbook. The pamphlet came from a relative of the student who had assured him that here was evidence of the white man's conspiracy to obfuscate historical truth. I had heard the pamphlet's story before, but never had I seen it in print, much less expected it to still be repeated so long after the life it described: nearly three generations after his death, Warren G. Harding was being heralded as the first black President of the United States. The student had little notion of who Harding was, much less the origins of the story about Harding's ancestry which had been popularized by a bitter partisan, white supremacist, and economics professor named William Estabrook Chancellor, who established something of a cottage industry by collecting wildly accusative and unsubstantiated gossip on the subject in the 1920s.[13] Myth was being celebrated as history by a young person who knew of injustice in the telling of only some stories but not of how to make a personal, empowering connection with the past. So starved are we for a sense of who we are that we have concocted a toxic "memory-effect" (apologies to the postmodernists) that replaces honest struggle with what we can know of the past with the gullibility to believe whatever confirms our unexamined preconceptions.

The pathos behind this incident lies in how a discreditable, shopworn story originally told out of hatred in order to "blacken" a political leader (an

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[12] "Liberation is praxis," Paulo Freire asserts, "the action and reflection of man upon their world in order to transform it." Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1970) 229-30.

[13] Francis Russell, *The Shadow of Blooming Grove: Warren G. Harding in His Times* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968) 530.

especially mediocre one, too) had been appropriated by members of a disempowered group to serve as a mark of pride. Such a transformation differs from taking an enemy's taunt and throwing it back in defiance; this is more akin to shifting garbage for a scrap of cultural identity. What did the student's textbook offer, however, as an alternative perspective of black Americans during the period, but passing nods to jazz, the Harlem Renaissance, and yet more sharecropping? How much better to locate a member of the group so close to the center of power that the "truth" of his origins has to be obscured! Tragically, however, the stories of survival and maintaining a cultural identity during a hostile time, monumental achievements in themselves, are lost by accepting the standard that the only people worth paying attention to are the ones who occupy the traditional seats of power.

Surely there is ground between the fantasy-history of the Harding myth and the cardboard images of a genial Louis Armstrong or a downtrodden sharecropper. This is not to deny the grim reality that many poor black southerners were forced to confront, but it is a plea to consider how the lives of the ignored and forgotten often provide the clearest insight into the relationships upon which our society chooses to depend. An historical individual remarkable for a strong sense of identity but not necessarily famous or powerful (someone like the Alabama farmer "Nate Shaw") can speak more directly to students about how the concerns of traditional political history form only a backdrop to the more immediate concerns of maintaining a sense of self in a culture that confuses identity and power.[14] By viewing individuals as they lived at the intersection of their knowledge and power, the barrenness of traditional political history can be

[14] Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974). "Nate Shaw" was the fictitious name of Ned Cobb (1885-1973).

replaced with a "pedagogy of cultural politics" in which students are encouraged not only to understand but to act on the realization of their social role.[15] The richness of the past becomes a source of liberation from the impecuniousness of the proper roles and statuses that histories have allotted us.

The new history, therefore, serves the radical function of challenging present power arrangements to justify themselves in terms of the fairness and justice we have proclaimed as essential to our wellbeing. Students are not expected only to master facts or to trace lines of historiographical debate; they must also consider how historical relationships relate to the present, with a view toward working for change. In this way, the teacher's, as opposed to the historian's, role is unique: knowledge is not simply to be acquired, or even created, but to be acted upon. The past, therefore, should be allowed to move us in the present so that identities drawn from it are active and not static. Just as the past is made alive with voices once unheard, so we are also better empowered to act in the world we have inherited. Acting in ways that strengthen our society's expectation of justice and opportunity, surely a fundamental (if often ignored) function of public education, requires the conscious selection of those stories which tell of the struggle against injustice and oppression as the ones we will most value. To tell of the experiences oppressed minorities have known, those most dangerous of memories, is to insist that we ask ourselves why the values we honestly espouse have been unrealized in so many lives.

The history which insists on linking past and present cannot bear witness unless it also testifies to the struggles of the past to realize our aspirations. We teach, after all, in anticipation of a better world which we shall never know. If we

[15] Henry A. Giroux, "Critical Pedagogy, Cultural Politics, and the Discourse of Experience," in James R. Gress and David E. Purpel, eds., *Curriculum: An Introduction to the Field* (Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1988) 442.

are to live in community with each other, secure in our ability to create identity, we need the testimony of that cloud of witnesses who have attempted before to realize what we also hope to achieve. We do not make the world anew as if all possibilities are unlimited; to think otherwise risks a fatally false sense of omniscience. We have no guarantee that our follies are any less pernicious than those of an earlier time; the human condition is frail enough that we had best draw upon the inspiration and instruction we can from what the past offers us. As our identity is corporate as well as individual, and also rooted in the past, history should inform us to the nature of the ties that have bound us together. Even the most powerful of the ties that make us a people, and not simply a collection of peoples, are not so strong that they can survive neglect. The wrongs we hope to redress require us to revisit the ideals we share and to remember that, just as we are capable of doing great wrong, so, too, do we conceive of noble ends.

It is, in fact, the joining of a radical critique of our histories and a conservative faith in the value of our ideals that gives the past its power to make its claim upon us. Society is defined by humanly ordained arrangements, and the history we choose to tell should serve to dispel the notion that social, political, and economic relationships are the handiwork of arbitrariness and determinism. We do not escape the past by ignoring it, for its influence is not so easily dismissed, yet our identity cannot be contained in narratives we have had no part in telling. Our understandings of the past impel us to act in the present, either to preserve those elements we value or to alter those relationships we deem harmful. However we choose to act--and our education should lead us to act in as conscious a manner as possible--the past provides the context which

defines what is possible.

Having entered the world as the latest generation, we cannot help but look to the past for some explanation of why we are here. The present age, however, has so completely freed itself from the sense of a universal time that connectedness with the past has been almost lost. A single lifetime now encompasses many times, not all of which fit neatly with one another--age, family, career, faith no longer seem so carefully linked with each other, let alone to grander political seasons, economic cycles, and the approaching millennium.[16] The extreme views of time hitherto offered by history--that time progresses toward a hopeful future or, for the downtrodden, hardly moves at all--no longer offer convincing descriptions of a world that is strikingly ambivalent about its future. Not knowing whether we are ushering in heaven or hell--purgatory does not appear to be an option in heralding the future--we hardly know what to ask of the past, except to wonder whether it has any relevance to what we are experiencing now.

Nevertheless, the change in how we perceive time has not been without welcome effects. There is an exhilarating freedom in responding to David Harvey's call that we "challenge the idea of a single and objective sense of time and space against which we can measure the diversity of human conceptions and perceptions."[17] We are freed, for example, from trying to reconcile history as progression toward apotheosis with the human evil we cannot seem to escape. It is, in fact, postmodernity's skepticism toward the spatial concept of hierarchy that allows for alternative histories which move away from the traditionally

[16] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989) 327.

[17] Harvey 327.

political. The multitude of past voices that we are more likely to hear today speaks to the power of a postmodernist emphasis on diversity. The dictatorships of our times have been proclaimed in the name of modernity's lockstep march into a utopian tomorrow; postmodernity's greater ease with human quirkiness offers hope in an anarchy of voices that may prove more resistant to totalitarianism's goosestep. More importantly, the multitudinous voices newly called forth remind us that a single truth is subject to contestation. That many of these voices have been shushed should give us pause to ask why and what we have missed by not hearing them.

The problem with abandoning a single sense of time and space, however, is that we risk losing all sense of equilibrium, which is not necessarily to be desired, even if it does accurately describe the world we know. When we abandon the authoritativeness of one history, all histories become suspect or, as in the case of the Harding myth, equally valid. Insistence upon faithfulness to facts sounds like the defensive action of an embattled status quo interested only in maintaining power. Still, freedom, which depends upon security in community, is different from license, which corrupts such security. If all we want our histories to do is to provide a sense of smug self-satisfaction or an image with which to impress our neighbors, we are unlikely to moderate the hyper-individualism that is driving us further apart from each other. Instead of allowing us to engage the present, we allow the past only to amuse our vanity aimlessly, like a specious coat of arms. The hard work of knowing who we are is forsaken for hedonistic abandon in believing that the present is the only reality.

In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey describes the "aestheticization of politics," in which aesthetics triumphs over ethics, images

over narrative, with simplism replacing life's complexity.[18] Suspicious of authority, we have convinced ourselves that meaning has been corrupted to serve only the interests of the powerful. If all stories are tainted, then it matters little which ones we tell--we might as well make up our own, so long as they provide a brief, if transitory, comfort. At the very time we need for the past to provide agency for the present, we have found that recovering a usable past is more difficult. Put another way, the welcome freedom we feel from histories that have been narrowly conceived has simultaneously made knowing any convincing account of the past more difficult. Postmodernism has robbed us of the meta-narratives that provided meaning for previous generations. History in the most extreme postmodernist critique, argue the authors of *Telling the Truth About History*, is irrelevant to identity because its dependence upon story and narrative (which, in turn, rest on now-suspect meta-narratives) make it incapable of critical thinking.[19]

The irony in postmodernist thought, of course, is that it attempts to substitute its own meta-narrative with the harrowing assertion that the world consists of no more than word games we cannot escape. Postmodernism commits the error common to radical thought of believing that the past can be ignored by force of will and that the stories we draw from it are merely propaganda for the status quo. While it is possible to find ourselves omitted from the histories we have been given, the past in which we *can* discover our origins remains a wellspring for understanding who we are. Unless we are content to sit amid "a rubble of signifiers," scraping the sores of our alienation with pieces of broken knowledge, we must dare to assert faith that this complex world holds meaning

[18] See especially Harvey 351-5.

[19] Appleby et al. 233.

greater than we can know but which nevertheless gives our lives purpose.[20] These are not good times for combining faith in our ability to arrive at meaning that transcends our transitory existence with an acceptance of a limitation to what we can know. Faith and effort, after all, are words with an old-fashioned ring, while paradox and limitation sit uneasily in a culture still desirous of certainty and unlimited possibility. Like a spoiled child, postmodernism would have us believe that we can know nothing if we cannot know everything. Behind the pouting lies the fear to believe that transcendence is possible, indeed, that such a concept cannot even be conceived because our words chain us to ourselves.

The ancient art of narrative, however, too strongly satisfies human desire to know for it to be dismissed as irrelevant. From the siege of Troy to television's soap operas, we want to know what happened; most of all, we want to know why. Language, together with music, art, and love, are all we have to express meaning; to moan at how it imprisons us with its closed system of self-referencing bespeaks a loss of faith in human creativity. To acknowledge that narrative contains inadequacies (as if it is different from other human undertaking), is different from denying its power to situate us in the historical processes that bound our existence. Rather than abandon the historian's art, we would do better to explore more fully the predispositions we bring to our work. Whether Edward Isham, to return to an earlier example, brings a stronger message about social alienation or economic struggle (assuming the two can be disengaged from each other) depends in no less degree on the predisposition of

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[20] "But in challenging all consensual standards of truth and justice, of ethics, and meaning, and in pursuing the dissolution of all narratives and meta-theories into a diffuse universe of language games, deconstructionism ended up, in spite of the best intentions of its more radical practitioners, by reducing knowledge and meaning to a rubble of signifiers." Harvey 351.

the hearer than on the lie of the evidence.

Our conversations with the past should include as many people, living and dead, as possible. Urging historians to make better efforts to excite the public's imagination about the past is one thing; perhaps more efficacious is empowering young people to creatively understand how they cannot fully live in the present except that they also live in the past, not in a mournful sense of loss but a celebratory feeling of discovery of who we are. By making reference outside of themselves, young people are more likely to find security and purpose in a turbulent world. Such a view of education sees history at its best as possessing a power to redeem us by pulling us out of our time to contemplate a past we can never fully know but that we believe will enable us to affect the present. Only as it combines faith in humankind's ability to continually fashion meaningful explanations of life with the certainty of our limited knowledge (and, as a consequence, the nearly unlimited possibilities for ways to view the past) can education be a source of engagement with the world.

We do not need to explain away as best we can the tragic stories of our nation's past; nor do those stories deny the existence of ideals toward which we strive. In fact, the side-by-side existence of the tragic with the ideal suggests, postmodernist criticism to the contrary, a meta-narrative with moving power. The two are inseparably linked, neither subsumed by the other: the tragic pointing to the unfulfilled ideal; the ideal a reminder of what we are capable of conceiving. In the cynicism that has resulted from disillusionment in trying to reconcile optimism and progress with the tragic stories that are also our heritage, however, we have concluded that a dull, flat hypocrisy--the post-modernist meta-narrative--best labels the past. Ironically, we insist on a consistency in the

past that we would find absurd to live by in the present, where our everyday reality consists of believing simultaneously in contradictory truths. Embracing paradox rather than hypocrisy generates a tension that keeps life dynamic instead of self-defeating.

Just as paradox pervades our lives, it also abounds in our past. The specific paradox central to American history, of course, is slavery and freedom, and, as Edmund S. Morgan has argued, the two not only co-existed, but "grew together, the one supporting the other."[21] Indeed, as the movement toward independence approached, "Virginians may have had a special appreciation of the freedom dear to republicans, because they saw every day what life without it could be like."[22] This is not an apologia for the indefensible, but a willingness to accept both our imperfections and our ability to envisage a higher end. The meta-narrative of paradox, embodying the duality of incompleteness and possibility, spurs us with an historical identity which compels us to act in the present by either justifying or altering the power arrangements by which we live.

A nation that prides itself on being classless but which has known sweatshops, that helped spawn concepts of equality while also having installed separate water fountains, that has assimilated into its cultural mainstream millions but also utilized the reservation system--every aspect of our national character related to the issue of power--offers ample opportunity for the exploration of paradox. Never fully realized, the ideals that have defined the most admirable qualities in the communities of our past retain their power to attract our energies, even as we are humbled by how our efforts have fallen

[21] Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975) 6.

[22] Morgan 376.

short. The multitude of histories we tell of the past foster our personal identities while also returning us to themes we share of hope and survival and our expectations for the succeeding generation.

Realization of our common struggle to arrive at meaning in life in an age that has made alienation an art form would be a major accomplishment in itself and might cause us to feel less threatened when we listen to stories that are different from our own. Those stories that move us, however, even as they also discomfort, will require a return to the promises that unite us with questions of why the promises have not been fulfilled. We discover that paradox results not from Fortune's whirling wheel but from the unpredictability, uncertainty, and contingency of human action. Our stories are imbued with tension: the values we cherish are weighed against the choices that we have made. When the choices weaken the values, we can decide to act or to abandon ourselves to a cultural götterdämmerung where, as the twilight darkens, we might at least be able to perceive how we lost those things which we once had thought important.

No paradox looms larger than that in which the past can be understood only in light of the present. T. S. Eliot wrote in *Four Quartets*:

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.[23]

Young people cannot be expected to undertake their arduous exploration except that we help them ask of the past the way back to it. To be useful, their questions will not be of passing antiquarian interest but will serve to orient them toward their journey. Though their questions may be different from the ones we have

[23] Eliot, "Little Gidding," V, 59.

asked, they will find how past generations have struggled with the same issues of relationship that they must confront. They will understand that they cannot know the past as it was, but only as it speaks to the present. They will discover that the struggle to be heard forges a solidarity between past and present. And therein they will find the courage to live their lives.

CHAPTER IV
THE LIMITS OF ENLIGHTENMENT

"Living history" is a term used by those who enjoy portraying the past through costume and recreation of historical events and periods. Much can be learned about the Revolutionary War, for example, by actually toting a heavy, flintlock musket and drilling with it so as to fire four rounds in a minute's time, as was expected of well-trained Continental soldiers. Working as an automaton, one grows accustomed to the gun's noise, which is less concussive to the person firing the weapon than it is to the cringing bystander, and to the smoke, which envelopes the musketmen in a fog reeking of sulfur. The drill's effect is impressive: a pleasing sense of coordination within the squad, the rumbling noise that echoes across a rolling field, the strangely ethereal feeling of firing within a bank of clouds. Both audience and participant leave satisfied that the past has been convincingly recreated.

There is, of course, much that has escaped us in our attempt to recapture the past. Unavailable to us are numerous details: the wool used in the newly-fashioned coats, for example, lacks the fineness to be left raw-edged, without a hem, unlike surviving originals.[1] While we can command a host of particulars concerning an eighteenth-century army's appearance, we really do not know how closely our composite image corresponds with what really existed at a given time and place. More glaring is how a few dozen men cannot hope to recreate the

[1] See, for example, the raw-edged wool broadcloth frock coat (1983-228) illustrated in Linda Baumgarten, *Eighteenth-Century Clothing at Williamsburg* (Williamsburg, Virginia: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1986) 64.

effect of an army numbering in the hundreds, struggling to maneuver over unfamiliar terrain in conditions far removed from the parade ground. What most lends such an air of untruthfulness to this scene, however, in spite of our best efforts to arrive at authenticity, is how the proceedings are framed with an "audience" which does not really expect to see blood or hunger or disease or suffering coming from the "participants." The event is clearly demarcated in time. While both audience and participant may be thrilled by their experience, no one lives in fear of the direction it might take or the uncertainty of how it will conclude. The reality is illusory and dissipates as quickly--and harmlessly--as the gunpowder's smoke.

This trivial illustration serves as metaphor for more serious, equally misguided efforts to know "original intent," an indication of how uncertain we are in our own judgment as evidenced in forums that include the performance of classical music on "authentic" instruments and debates over how the Supreme Court should arrive at its decisions. All such attempts to arrive at new-old understandings will come to frustration, however, if we fail to remember that we cannot separate ourselves from our times--we can no more read the Constitution as did the Founding Fathers, removed from them as we are by two centuries of political experience, than we can hear Mozart the way his Viennese audience did. One might even argue that the postmodern critique of the function of knowledge explains more about the supercilious belief that the experience of one age can be swapped for another than does the desire for authenticity.

The living history reenactment suggests several ways in which our knowledge of the past is always circumscribed, constraints that concern the past itself as well as ones regarding us. The simplest limitation on our knowledge is

that too many facts about the past elude us. Time acts as the great eraser of memory, leaving us to search for what may be irrecoverably lost. Even so, this limitation is hardly the most severe one confronting our quest to know the past, despite the attention it popularly receives every time a new and unforeseen discovery about the past is announced.[2] Given that we had at our disposal all possible facts, we would still be left with deciding their meaning, an undertaking that varies in difficulty with the quantity of information available but which is, nevertheless, more difficult than gathering evidence. The difficulty lies primarily in trying to think like those who lived on the opposite side of the events we are studying with experiences and perspectives that are different from our own. When we consider Robert Darnton's observation that "other people are other," we realize how the historian must tease "the meaning inscribed by contemporaries in whatever survives of their vision of the world."[3] Our experience in this world, however, circumscribes what we can know of an "other" one. To return to an earlier example, Mozart sounds different, even when faithfully played in the style he would have approved of and on the instruments he knew (two centuries of use or neglect notwithstanding), to the ears that have also heard Stravinsky, not to mention rock-and-roll, which means that we can only surmise how the former's music sounded before the experience of the latter. Our knowledge is of the second-hand kind, as we always remain conscious of our status as outsiders looking through the windows of a salon at individuals who cannot return our gaze.

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[2] This is not to deny how an unexpected historical find can transform our understanding of an earlier era. For one recent and well-publicized example, the discovery in Egypt of the tombs of Ramesses II's sons, see Douglas Preston, "All the King's Sons," *The New Yorker* 22 January 1996: 44-59.

[3] Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre* (New York: Random House, 1985) 4-5.

Evidence and interpretation are the purview of the historian. All of us--teacher and historian--should also consider our own restraints to what we can know. Just as past and present exist only in relationship to each other, so we cannot understand the stories we recover without knowing of our own stories, in particular those stories that motivate us with their meaning. The past does not lie still, awaiting our discovery; it instead expects "an agent who actively molds how the past is to be seen."[4] Our agency flows from our identity, and it sensitizes us to what we are able to hear and what we want to ask of the past. Joyce Appleby and her colleagues describe the awareness of this "interactive relationship" as a "practical realism," which requires the teacher/historian to maintain as much faithfulness to facts as possible by acknowledging the values we bring to the historical inquiry.[5]

The human condition guarantees that our efforts to know ourselves will be flawed--the task has not gotten any easier since Socrates's day. Worse still would be the attempt to mitigate our struggle by deluding ourselves that nothing more is required than to be more inclusive of the stories of others on the assumption that we are acting with their best interest at heart. We are not free agents; if we are alienated from each other, we also bound together by sharing this sense of loss. The effect of our common estrangement is to hamper what any one individual feels empowered to do. Simply deciding by oneself to be more inclusive of other's stories, however admirable, will not do because of the broader and overpowering sense that nothing we attempt will make much difference. If we fail to address alienation on the societal level, we will be frustrated with witnessing the efforts of no more than a few rare individuals

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[4] Appleby et al. 249.

[5] Appleby et al. 247, 261.

willing to risk their own social standing by displaying the fortitude to buck the mood of the culture.

Michael Lerner has termed as "surplus powerlessness" this "debilitating psychological effects of oppression and the internalization of cruelty."[6] Rather than attempt to change the world, Lerner argues, we succumb to the temptation to accommodate ourselves to it. More than just accepting the culture's "common sense," Lerner argues that surplus powerlessness "is also intertwined with a complex set of feelings about oneself."[7] We are able to believe that whatever happens to us is deserved, hence the sense of futility we feel about trying to change the world.

Lerner locates the source of much of this powerlessness in the Jewish experience as a subjected and dispersed people, but we can also find surplus powerlessness at work for another reason as well.[8] The temptation to yield to the present arrangement of power is a particularly alluring one for, as Michel Foucault has observed, power is "a productive network that runs through the whole social body" where "it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse."[9] Power, then, is not simply a repressive thing imposed from on high; it is the very framework of our existence.

So, we reach the great divide in contemporary existence. Modernism, with its roots in the Enlightenment's rational inquiry and denial that the past has any claim on the present, stands before the heap of progress's broken promises,

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[6] Michael Lerner, *Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1994) 111.

[7] Lerner 112.

[8] Lerner 316-7.

[9] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) 119.

opposite the call of a spiritual ethos to transcend the present world in order to change it with the power of what Foucault described as the "insurrection of subjected knowledges."[10] Transcendence's call is spiritual because we are asked not to depend solely on the experiences and knowledge of the present but to hear, sometimes for the first time, the cry for justice from the voices of the past. At the same time, we do not surrender ourselves to a view of the past that renders us the helpless products of its historicism, but we recognize that, in their own fashion, others have been where we now are, struggling with issues that are never finally resolved. The past, then, is too rich for a shallow two-dimensional triumphalism, and we depend upon the resourcefulness and rigorousness of historical research to illuminate the variety of possibilities for understanding the present. Our spiritual ethos makes urgent this need to know.

"The [Christian] memory of suffering . . . brings a new moral imagination into political life, a new vision of others' suffering that should mature into a generous, uncalculating partisanship on behalf of the weak and unrepresented," asserts Johann-Baptist Metz.[11] We who teach must decide if we will serve an end higher than ourselves: by listening to those whom the rest of society has decided not to hear, we have made a decision to challenge the existing arrangement of power. For the teacher motivated by Christian precept, the motivating model is of the Jesus who outraged the established order by befriending the sinner and comforting the outcast while directing his wrath toward the powerful's hypocrisy of claiming to love God while not recognizing Him in their neighbor. This model is a dangerous one because it is subversive and, therefore, not the way our culture usually recognizes an individual's religious orientation. Jesus,

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[10] Foucault 81.

[11] Metz 15.

after all, was crucified because he insisted on an active faith that transformed the world in ways that brought it closer to a Kingdom in which the first should be last.

While we are quick to welcome the Christ who comforts the lowly with an assurance of future glory, we are less inclined to recognize how his claim to transform life in the present is based on the belief, rooted in Jewish theology, that because we are created in the image of God our worth is intrinsic and not something to be achieved. Our task is to realize this sense of worth by insisting that the stories we most value return us to an examination of our claims to a just and fair society. What we will discover in these stories is that both oppressor and oppressed reside in each of us.[12] As flawed creatures, perfect justice and fairness will always elude us--Peter's denial that he knew Jesus was as earnest as his avowal to follow him even to death had been shortly before. To the extent of our failure to realize this utopia, we act as oppressor, even if unintentionally and regretfully.

At the same time, we have no choice but to act out of our own blemished past. Rarely are we as individuals able to live out our perfect dreams and aspirations, despite whatever material advantages we may possess. In the mystery of our existence we conceive of ends higher than we can achieve, burdened, nevertheless, if we hope to maintain our humanity, with the responsibility to pursue them. "To remember the reality of oppression in the lives of people and to value those lives," affirms Sharon Welch, "is to be saved from the luxury of hopelessness."[13] It is at this point that the tension between

[12] For an example of someone moved by a sense of being both oppressor and oppressed, see Sharon D. Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985) ix-x.

[13] Welch 90.

religious conviction and rational enlightenment is held in balance: the memory of the suffering of Christ impels us to delve into the historical record for the subjugated and forgotten stories that retain their power to move us. We dare to expect transcendence in the manner that the word has been defined by Michael Lerner: "Transcendence is not transcending *this* world, but rather our ability to bring more fully into being *in* this world aspects of ourselves and aspects of reality that surround us but to which we have become tone deaf."[14] We have accomplished this goal in material ways, thinking that the material would in and of itself take care of the spiritual. Public education in particular has succumbed to the fallacy that conflates prosperity with a vibrant community, dulling us to the idea that the unrestrained pursuit of the former may actually subvert the latter.

To be genuinely concerned with the education of our youth, the teacher/historian cannot assume that it is possible for scholarship to remain both relevant and above the fray of political interests contending for domination in society. Perhaps no scholar has employed such riotous imagery to describe the folly of an insular and unrestrained pursuit of history as did the Oxford cleric Robert Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621):

> Your supercilious criticks, grammatical triflers, notemakers, curious antiquaries, find out all the ruins of wit, gutters of folly, amongst the rubbish of old writers; and what they take they spoil, all fools with them that cannot find fault; they correct others, & are hot in a cold cause, puzzle themselves to find out how many streets in Rome, houses, gates, towers, Homer's country, Aeneas's mother, Niobe's daughters, whether Sappho was a public woman? which came first, the egg or the hen? &c & other things which you would try to forget if you ever knew them, as Seneca holds; . . . which for the present for an historian to relate . . . is very ridiculous, is to them most precious elaborate stuff, they admired for it, and as proud, as triumphant in the mean time for this discovery, as if they had won a city, or conquered

[14] Lerner 29.

a province; as rich as if they had found a mine of gold ore.[15]

Burton makes plain his attitude that the intellectual's labor is pointless--"mad," or "melancholic," to use his phraseology--if it bears no relation to present-day concerns.[16] "Is not he mad that draws lines with Archimedes, whilst his house is ransacked, and his city besieged, when the whole world is in combustion, or we whilst our souls are in danger . . . to spend our time in toys, idle questions, and things of no worth?"[17]

We stand in danger today of losing both our souls and a belief that what we know can make for a more just society by acquiescing to relationships that tolerate the inequities dividing and separating us. Ultimately, soul and mind are joined, which means that any threat to one endangers the other. When we refuse to acknowledge humankind's suffering, our role in extending it, and our ability to challenge it, we cast our wizened souls into the darkness, confessing that knowledge's only purpose is to perpetuate our own power. We deny the ignored knowledges of others, which means that we also disregard anyone not like us. Instead of aspiring to liberate the captive, we search for ways to be more secure in our role as oppressor, desperately hoping that we are able to live out our days and die peacefully in our beds.

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[15] Robert Burton, "Democritus to the Reader," in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1927) 95-6.

[16] Burton also recognized how a scholar too often must depend upon the support of the powerful in order to make his own existence economically viable, anticipating the more sinister observation of Aronowitz and Giroux cited earlier. "So they [scholars] prostitute themselves, as fiddlers or mercenary tradesmen, to serve great men's turns for a small reward." Burton 265.

[17] Burton 96.

"Whatever," reads the bumper sticker of our times, a frankly dispiriting admission that none of our stories matter much because all of them lack the power to direct our lives in meaningful ways. We are too cynical to believe the stories told to us by authority and we lack the faith that anyone else's can change anything. We have at our disposal, however, memory that is dangerous, if only we can summon the courage to give it voice. Required of us is a faith that is not asked to believe in the unseen but one that, as Sharon Welch has observed, "is a stance of being, an acceptance of risk and openness, an affirmation of both the importance of human life (its dimension of ultimate significance) and the refusal to collapse that ultimacy into a static given, identifying it as definitively achieved in some concrete medium of its manifestation."[18] This faith is pragmatic; however we individually ascribe the source of our motivation, we must collectively insist on results that are tangible while simultaneously remembering that the past which informs also circumscribes. Our victories will be hard-won yet incomplete, life-changing yet never permanently secure.

Faith in transcendence is the vehicle that shuttles between human enlightenment and spiritual insight. Enlightenment allows for a reconstruction of the past in ways that speak to the identity of the present. It insists in fidelity to the facts as best they can be recovered and understood while not only acknowledging the agency we bring to the making of history but also critically analyzing how our agency has been used to fashion an understanding of who we are. It is simplistic to claim knowledge for its own sake; we expect that what we know will make a difference in how we live (an assertion with both good and evil ramifications). Truth as the historian would understand it is provisional and

[18] Welch 78.

subject to revision as the past reveals more of itself and both we and our times change to allow the past to be seen in different lights. We carry with us as a lodestone, however, faith that we can transcend the world as we know it with the world as we would have it.

Our research offices and classrooms will remain no more than the habitations of Burton's grammatical triflers and notemakers if we do not make explicit which stories we most want to hear and to tell. Choosing those stories is not easy; life abounds with enough pain that all of us share in it, and each identity, of course, is a prized possession to be nurtured. Perhaps, then, there is a lesson here for our nation's public education: a good share of what students learn should be directed by them in order to fulfill the personal need for rooting their own being in time and space. Without historical consciousness, individuals are left to endure alone the vicissitudes of the present, unaware of the ties that join them with others and to the decisions that have shaped their lives. This precept rests on the notion of the individual's intrinsic worth and suggests a pedagogical model in which teachers are responsible for helping students with the techniques of historical research and then getting out of the way. Without care, however, we might quickly find ourselves back at the "whatever" attitude in which any identity, based on any slipshod story, is acceptable, even apart from the question of being honest with the facts. Identities are not part of a wardrobe, to be suited with whatever personal statement we may wish to make. Understanding one's identity is arduous, even painful, and the labor of a lifetime, both in and out of the classroom.

Such an individual approach to learning, however, no matter how honest, will support our society only so far. As we flourish or perish by the strength of

our sense of community, we had better summon the fortitude required to persevere, whatever the limitations on our abilities to know, in recovering the stories that return us to a social contract of life lived free from want and fear. We fail not when we are forced to admit how transcending our present existence constantly eludes us but when we do not use the truth we have. Principal among what we can claim as truth is the ability to make our moralism honest by molding a past that is as rich, complex, and paradoxical as the present. To do less is to deny too many of the voices of the dead, which is little different from shunting aside those of the living.

How does the teacher/historian accommodate to a role that flies in the face of so much that public education is about these days? Robert Burton concluded that the world was filled with "such shifting, lying, cogging, plotting, counter-plotting, temporizing, flattering, cozening, dissembling, that of necessity one must highly offend God, if he be comfortable to the world, . . . or else live in contempt, disgrace, and misery."[19] I know of no more difficult question, for teaching as a *profession* in the earliest meaning of the word--a public acknowledgement of belief--is impatient of temporizing. It helps to know that the experience of teaching allows for teachers to learn and grow alongside their students and to be of help even when they are unsure of what to do. Ultimately, however, the countless small decisions of daily existence color a lifetime, and, in the end, we stand alone with the effects of our choices. We will face that time with greater ease knowing that we recognized our limitations, did our best within them, and looked for ways to push them back.

Knowing of limits is perhaps the one eternal, universal human lesson, if one may dare to use such words in a postmodernist world. Foucault wrote of a

[19] Burton 53.

life that is "conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them."[20] Admitting to the limits of our knowledge is not surrender to despair; it is, rather, a precondition for attempting to go beyond them. We are relieved of the burden of an unobtainable omniscience because we understand that we live only in reference to a specific past which cannot be denied. We know our faults, prejudices, idiosyncrasies--and recognizing them , we can purposely contend with them. We are also more likely to have a realistic notion of what is possible, both at our best and worst. We are not, however, permitted the luxury of relinquishing our duty to test those limits. The goals toward which we strive are not abstract; they are based on what we have been able to conceive and to accomplish in our past. Should we allow ourselves to be intoxicated by the postmodernist endeavor to deny the existence of any meaning apart from the culture's arrangement of power, and thereby succumb to a feeling of impotence at effecting change, we will have inadvertently given the triumph to the seats of power we would challenge.

The search for a usable past begins, and ends, with a meditation on family history. Sometime on the 1850s, Nathan Wesley Culclasure and his wife Sarah sat for their photographs to be made in Orangeburg, South Carolina. The photographs came into my branch of the family through the scanty collection of personal papers left by a great-aunt. She had apparently misidentified the couple, giving them the names of her parents--their children--a blatant error considering his silk cravat and frock coat and her lace gloves and chignon. This

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[20] Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984) 50.

old, spinster great-aunt, as I had known her, was absorbed with the family's history to the extent that in her declining years she mailed to me, along with the postage stamps she had clipped for my collection, the hokum of commercial genealogies she had obtained, convinced of their explanation of the family name. So, who knows?--she was just as likely to have bought the photographs, identified only by the town where they were made, at a flea market, penciling on the back the names of the people she wanted to see in them. Few facts, much room for speculation.

I think the photographs are of family ancestors, however, and I have the strangest feeling looking at the one I think was Nathan Wesley. There, except for the pomaded hair and tall, stiff shirt collar, sits my brother, or my father, as a young man. It is hard to say exactly what makes the resemblance so strong--the soft chin, perhaps, or the wistful look of the deep-set, lightly-colored eyes. Considering the physical features, one wonders whether other, less easily-detected characteristics of personality could also be preserved across so much time. What qualities, for example, were required of a slaveholder, and were such qualities inheritable? This man, after all, lived at a time when the institution was under furious attack. Surely his feelings were complex, even contradictory, just as ours are in issues both related and unconnected with race. Looking at the incongruous combination of an almost shy, youthful, visage and his clenched, gloved, and authoritative hand, it is easy to imagine the tentativeness with which he might have faced his future. And what of Sarah, his wife: Did her role as mistress of the household require of her characteristics that had to be carefully cultivated because they were so unnatural, or do humans, when provided the opportunity, easily tend toward tyranny? Imagining, however, is all we can do as

we look at the faded photographs, since, except for their appearances in census reports and the sites of their graves, the couple left no other tangible record of their existence.

The fact of the photographs's existence is clear enough; their identity slightly less certain; what one sees in them may be as much the result of looking inward as outward. Entwined in this family are many stories, untold and, to a degree, unknowable, but, nevertheless, stories that can be partially reclaimed: a young couple separated by war, an extended family (allegorically, at least), separated by race; an existence depending on the pain visited upon others swept up in unimaginable fury; the legacy of two families, former masters and freedmen, consciously sharing little more than their surname. The stories's endings are frayed; they lack the sense of a triumphal march into the future. They are also painful, which, for a people characterized by optimism, is an unwelcome quality. So painful, in fact, that remembering in terms of how equality, opportunity, fairness, and justice are defined and practiced today makes them dangerous threats to the arrangements of power in the present. That is all the more reason for telling them, for, without stories like these to make us consider the choices we have made, we will too easily be convinced that impersonal historical forces are beyond our ability to direct. Should we come to this conclusion, we would have abandoned the agency that makes us human. We would have also lost any morally justifiable reason to teach.

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