The Presence in the Past

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They came long before Columbus. For reasons we can only guess, they had stopped in this arid land where their sole sources of water were gigantic sinkholes nature had carved into the limestone. Here, in the province of Chichén, they had built their temples between two of these wells. They had surveyed the skies from these heights, master astronomers, aware of mathematical secrets that Europeans barely guessed. They were practiced warriors. Most strikingly, they were devout. They had kept one well for themselves and given to their gods the deep one with the green waters.

I knew all these stories. I had done my homework before coming to Maya land. Now, I wanted something real. Hunting, my eyes descended the limestone walls eighty feet down into the well. This was the Cenote of Sacrifice, the Sacred Well of Chichén Itzá.

The still green waters did not speak of war and murder. Not a ripple of blood disturbed their cool surface. Here and there a dead leaf, dropped from the air far above, left a patch of darker green over the underground lake. But there was no movement on the water surface. Here, the past was hidden by a verdant coat of silence.

I coughed nervously, sweeping the water with my binoculars. I was in search of evidence. I was eager to see a corpse, a skull, some bones,

any gruesome trace of history. But the belly of the earth uttered only the echo of my cough.

Yet history had to be there. Below the water, hundreds of corpses melted into the earth—women, men, and children, many of them thrown alive to deities now forgotten, for reasons now murkier than the bottom of this well. Stories about these sacrifices spanned at least ten centuries. Scavengers of all sorts—colonists, diplomats, warriors, and archaeologists—had unearthed the proofs behind these narratives. Still, I felt disappointed: there was nothing here to touch, nothing to see except a dormant green liquid.

I retraced my steps along the ancient path to the central pyramid. That, at least, seemed concrete, and I had not yet made the journey to the top. Up there, as in the well, history required bodily donations. I had to pay my part of sweat for the encounter to be sincere. Stoically, I climbed the stairs, all 354 of them, and I ventured into the ruins. Inside, for a long time, I ran my fingers on the walls, probing mysteries unresolved, longing for recognition. But as much as I was touched by the magnificence of the structure, I never came to feel that I was touching history. I climbed down the pyramid, careful not to look into the void, blaming myself for this failure to communicate with a past so magnificently close.

Many exotic lands later, I understood better my trip to Chichén Itzá. History was alive and I had heard its sounds elsewhere. From Rouen to Santa Fe, from Bangkok to Lisbon, I had touched ghosts suddenly real, I had engaged people far remote in time and in space. Distance was no barrier. History did not need to be mine in order to engage me. It just needed to relate to someone, anyone. It could not just be The Past. It had to be someone's past.

In my first trip to the Yucatan, I had failed to meet the peoples whose past Chichén Itzá was. I could not resuscitate a single mathematician viewing the skies from the Caracol, a single sacrificial victim pushed toward the green waters. And I knew even less then how to relate the Mayas of today to the architects of the pyramids. That,

no doubt, was my fault, my lack of imagination, or a shortfall of erudition. At any rate, I had missed a vital connection to the present. I had honored the past, but the past was not history.

Slavery in Disneyland

The controversies about EuroDisney had not yet faded when the mammoth transnational revealed its plans for Disney's America, a new amusement park to be built in northern Virginia. Aware that environmental and historical tourism are among the fastest growing branches of that industry, Disney emphasized the historical themes of the park. Afro-American slavery was one of them.

Protests immediately erupted. Black activists accused Disney of turning slavery into a tourist attraction. Others intimated that white corporate types were not qualified to address the subject. Others wondered whether the subject should be addressed at all. Disney's chief imageer tried to calm the public: activists need not worry, we guarantee the exhibit to be "painful, disturbing and agonizing."

William Styron, a popular novelist, author of such best-sellers as *Sophie's Choice* and *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, denounced Disney's plans in the pages of *The New York Times*.[1] Styron, whose grandmother owned slaves, asserted that Disney could only "mock a theme as momentous as slavery" because "slavery cannot be represented in exhibits." Whatever the images displayed and the technical means deployed, the artifacts of cruelty and oppression "would have to be fraudulent" because they would be inherently unable to "define such a stupendous experience." The moral dilemmas of many whites and especially the suffering of blacks would be missing from the exhibit, not because such experiences could not be displayed, but because their very display would beget a cheap romanticism. Styron concluded: "At Disney's Virginia park, the slave experience would permit vis-

itors a shudder of horror before they turned away, smug and self-exculpatory, from a world that may be dead but has not really been laid to rest."

When I first read these lines, I wished a practicing historian had written them. Then it occurred to me that few historians could have done so. Indeed, my second thought was for another novelist writing about yet a third one.

In a story often evoked in debates about authenticity, Jorge Luis Borges imagines that a French novelist of the 1930s produces a novel that is word for word a fragmentary version of *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. Borges insists: Pierre Ménard did not copy *Don Quixote*, nor did he try to be Miguel de Cervantes. He rejected the temptation to mimic both Cervantes's life and style as too facile. He achieved his feat after many drafts, at the end of which his text was the same as that of Cervantes.[2] Is that second novel a fake and why? Is it, indeed, a "second" novel? What is the relationship between Ménard's work and that of Cervantes?

Disney dropped its plans for the Virginia park, much less because of the controversy about slavery than in reaction to other kinds of pressure.[3] Still, the plans for the park can be interpreted as a parody of Borges's parody. Indeed, read against one another, the respective projects of the transnational and of Borges's fictitious writer provide a pointed lesson about the fourth moment of historical production, the moment of retrospective significance.[4]

Neither in the case of the park nor in that of the book is empirical exactitude a primary issue. Disney could gather all the relevant facts for its planned exhibits, just as the words in Ménard's final draft were exactly the same as those in Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Indeed, the Disney corporation flaunted its use of historians as paid consultants—proof, as it were, of its high regard for empirical exactitude. The limitless possibility for errors remained but, other things being equal, one could imagine a version of Disney's America as empirically sound as the average history book.

Styron, who wrote a controversial novel about slavery, knows this. He expresses concerns about empirical issues, but his emphasis is elsewhere. Styron even admits, although reluctantly, that Disney could duplicate the mood of the times. Modern imageers have enough means to stage virtual reality. Yet Styron remains indignant, and it is this indignation that helps him stir his way through his previous objections toward a conclusion that follows the tourists until *after* they turn away.

Deconstruction's most famous line may be Jacques Derrida's sentence: *il n'y a pas de hors-texte.* How literally can we take the claim that there is no life beyond the text? To be sure, we may decide not to get out of the amusement park. We can argue that if Disney's imageers had produced the virtual reality of slavery, the paying tourist would have been projected in history. It would have mattered little then, if that projection were a short or even short-sighted representation. Similarly, we may tell Borges that the issue of authenticity is irrelevant and that both novels are the same, however awkward this phrasing. Yet if such answers are unsatisfactory, then, we need to get out the text(s) and look for life after Disney. And, I would argue, getting out the text enables us also to get out of the tyranny of the facts. The realization that historical production is itself historical is the only way out of the false dilemmas posed by positivist empiricism and extreme formalism.

In the subtext of Styron's objections is a fundamental premise: Disney's primary public was to be white middle-class Americans. They are the ones for whom the park was planned, if only because their aggregate buying power makes them the prime consumers of such historical displays. They are the ones most likely to have plunged into the fake agony of Disney's virtual reality. Styron does not spell out this premise, expressed only through innuendos. Perhaps he wants to avoid accusations of bending to "political correctness." Perhaps he wants to avoid the issue of collective

white guilt. He is careful to suggest, quite rightly in my view, that the exhibit would have misrepresented the experiences of both blacks and whites.

The value of a historical product cannot be debated without taking into account both the context of its production and the context of its consumption.[5] It may be no accident that this insight comes from a popular novelist in the pages of a mass market daily. At any rate, few academic historians would have set the problem in these terms; for academic historians are trained to neglect the very actor that Styron or *The New York Times* cannot ignore, the public. The nature of that public is at the center of Styron's objections.

To phrase the argument in these terms is immediately to reintroduce history or, better, to refuse to get out of it for the seraphic comfort of the text or the immutable security of The Past. Styron refuses to separate the history of slavery from that of the United States after the Civil War. He devotes just a few lines to the time after Union cavalry men invaded his grandmother's plantation, to the fate of the ex-slaves, to Jim Crow laws and the Ku Klux Klan, and to illiteracy among blacks. He adds, almost in passing, that this post-slavery period is what actually haunts him.

The time that elapsed between the demise of slavery and the planning of the Virginia park shaped the meaning of Disney's representation of slavery. Time here is not mere chronological continuity. It is the range of disjointed moments, practices, and symbols that thread the historical relations between events and narrative. Borges's Ménard makes this complex point in simpler terms: "It is not in vain that three hundred years have passed, charged with the most complex happenings—among them, to mention only one, that same *Don Quixote*."[6] We could parody him further: it is not irrelevant that a century of complex occurrences has passed in the United States, while slavery hangs on as an issue. That U.S. slavery has both officially ended, yet contin-

ues in many complex forms—most notably institutionalized racism and the cultural denigration of blackness—makes its representation particularly burdensome in the United States. Slavery here is a ghost, both the past and a living presence; and the problem of historical representation is how to represent that ghost, something that is and yet is not.

I disagree, therefore, with Styron's comment that the Holocaust Museum in Washington is illuminating and that displays of slavery in Virginia would be obscene because of some inherent difference in magnitude or complexity between the two phenomena described. That argument rests on the assumption of a fixed past. But the cost accounting of historical suffering makes sense only as a presence projected in the past. That presence ("look at me now") and its projection ("I have suffered") function together as a new exhibit for claims and gains in a changing present. Many European Jews who condemn projects of parody at Auschwitz or elsewhere in Poland, Germany, France, or the Soviet Union deploy the same moral arguments that Styron uses against mock plantations today in Virginia.

Do displays of Jewish genocide run greater risks of being obscene in Poland than in Virginia? The illuminating value of the Holocaust Museum in Washington may be as much tied to the current situation of American Jews as to the real bodies in and around Auschwitz. Indeed, many Holocaust survivors are not sure that such a museum would be illuminating at Auschwitz itself. The crux of the matter is the here and now, the relations between the events described and their public representation in a specific historical context.

These relations debunk the myth of The Past as a fixed reality and the related view of knowledge as a fixed content. They also force us to look at the purpose of this knowledge. What is scary about tourist attractions representing slavery in the United States is not so much that the tourists would learn the wrong facts, but

rather, that touristic representations of the facts would induce among them the wrong reaction. Obviously, the word "wrong" has different meanings here. It denotes inaccuracy in the first case. In the second, it suggests an immoral or, at least, unauthentic behavior.

Cascardi suggests that "authenticity is not a type or degree of knowledge, but a relationship to what is known."[7] To say that "what is known" must include the present will seem self-evident, but it may be less obvious that historical authenticity resides not in the fidelity to an alleged past but in an honesty vis-à-vis the present as it re-presents that past. When we imagine Disney's project and visualize a line of white tourists munching on chewing gum and fatty food, purchasing tickets for the "painful, disturbing and agonizing" experience promised by television ads, we are not into The Past. And we should not ask these tourists to be true to that past: they were not responsible for slavery. What is obscene in that image is not a relation to The Past, but the dishonesty of that relation as it would happen in our present. The trivialization of slavery—and of the suffering it caused—inheres in that present, which includes both racism and representations of slavery. Ironically, a visit by a Klan member actively promoting racial inequality would have stood a better chance of authenticity. At least, it would not have trivialized slavery.

One understands why many practicing historians kept silent. The denunciation of slavery in a presentist mode is easy. Slavery was bad, most of us would agree. But, presentism is by definition anachronistic. To condemn slavery alone is the easy way out, as trivial as Pierre Menard's first attempt to become Cervantes. What needs to be denounced here to restore authenticity is much less slavery than the racist present within which representations of slavery are produced. The moral incongruence stems from this uneasy overlap of the two sides of historicity.

Not surprisingly, survivors of all kinds are more likely than his-

torians to denounce these trivializations. Thus, Vidal-Naquet warns us that if Holocaust narratives, even if empirically correct, lose their relationship to the living present, Jews and perhaps non-Jews would have suffered a moral defeat, and Holocaust survivors would have been returned symbolically to the camps. Pierre Weill approves in different terms: There is no purpose to the speeches and banners that marked the fiftieth celebration of Auschwitz's liberation by Soviet troops. The celebrations were a vain effort by state officials throughout the West to commemorate an impossible anniversary.

Survivors carry history on themselves, as Vidal-Naquet well knows. Indeed, a key difference between U.S. slavery and the European Holocaust is that no former slaves are alive today in the United States. This physical embodiment, a historical relation carried on the self, is crucial to Vidal-Naquet's distinction between history and memory. Thus, Vidal-Naquet worries about representations of the Holocaust once his generation is gone. But we should be careful not to push too far the distinction between various kinds of survivors. Weill, indeed, refuses to do so: As long as every living Jew, "regardless of age," remains an Auschwitz survivor, one cannot celebrate the liberation of Auschwitz.[8]

We are back into this present that we thought we could escape after the death of the last man.[9] It is from within this present that survivors, actors, and fellow narrators are asking us: what for? The meaning of history is also in its purpose. Empirical exactitude as defined and verified in specific context is necessary to historical production. But empirical exactitude alone is not enough. Historical representations—be they books, commercial exhibits or public commemorations—cannot be conceived only as vehicles for the transmission of knowledge. They must establish some relation to that knowledge. Further, not any relation will do. Authenticity is required, lest the representation becomes a fake, a morally repugnant spectacle.

By authenticity, I do not mean a mere simulacrum, a remake of Columbus's caravels, a mock battle on an anniversary or an exact model of a slave plantation. Neither do I mean a plunge into The Past. For how far can we plunge without trying to become Miguel de Cervantes in the way that Ménard first tried and found cheap and too easy? To be sure, injustices made to previous generations should be redressed: they affect the descendants of the victims. But the focus on The Past often diverts us from the present injustices for which previous generations only set the foundations.

From that viewpoint, the collective guilt of some white liberals toward "the slave past" of the United States, or the "colonial past" of Europe can be both misplaced and inauthentic. As a response to current accusations, it is misplaced inasmuch as these individuals are not responsible for the actions of their chosen ancestors. As a self-inflicted wound, it is comfortable inasmuch as it protects *them* from a racist present.

Indeed, none of us today can be true to Afro-American slavery—whether for or against it—as we can be true to ongoing practices of discrimination. Similarly, individuals in the Old World or in Latin America today cannot be true or false to a colonialism they did not live. What we know about slavery or about colonialism can—should, indeed—increase our ardor in the struggles against discrimination and oppression across racial and national boundaries. But no amount of historical research about the Holocaust and no amount of guilt about Germany's past can serve as a substitute for marching in the streets against German skinheads today. Fortunately, quite a few prominent German historians understand that much.

Authenticity implies a relation with what is known that duplicates the two sides of historicity: it engages us both as actors and narrators. Thus, authenticity cannot reside in attitudes toward a discrete past kept alive through narratives. Whether it invokes, claims, or rejects The Past, authenticity obtains only in regard to

current practices that engage us as witnesses, actors, and commentators—including practices of historical narration. That the foundations of such practices were set by our precursors with the added value of their respective power is an inherent effect of the historicity of the human condition: none of us starts with a clean slate. But the historicity of the human condition also requires that practices of power and domination be renewed. It is that renewal that should concern us most, even if in the name of our pasts. The so-called legacies of past horrors—slavery, colonialism, or the Holocaust—are possible only because of that renewal. And that renewal occurs only in the present. Thus, even in relation to The Past our authenticity resides in the struggles of our present. Only in that present can we be true or false to the past we choose to acknowledge.

If authenticity belongs to the present, academic historians—and quite a few philosophers—may have lured themselves into a corner. The traditions of the guild, reinforced by a positivist philosophy of history, forbid academic historians to position themselves regarding the present. A fetishism of the facts, premised on an antiquated model of the natural sciences, still dominates history and the other social sciences. It reinforces the view that any conscious positioning should be rejected as ideological. Thus, the historian's position is officially unmarked: it is that of the non-historical observer.

The effects of this stance can be quite ironic. Since historical controversies often revolve on relevance—and therefore, at least in part, on the positioning of the observer—academic historians tend to keep as far away as possible from the historical controversies that most move the public of the day. In the United States, a few have intervened in the historical debates that made news in the early 1990s: the alleged role of Jews as slave owners, the Holocaust, the Alamo, the Smithsonian exhibits on the American West and on Hiroshima, or the Virginia park project.[10] But many more

qualified historians have kept public silence on these and similar issues. That silence even extends to debates about the national standards for history that academics seem to have abandoned to pundits and politicians.

To be sure, the distance between scholarly and public discourses in the United States is extreme when compared, for instance, with the situation in France or in Germany.[11] American scholars have largely abandoned the role of public intellectual to pundits and entertainers. But the U.S. extreme tells us something about the continuum to which it belongs. At the heart of the noninvolvement of U.S. historians is the guild's traditional attachment to the fixity of pastness.

Professional historians have made good use of the creation of the past as a distinct entity, a creation that paralleled the growth of their own practice.[12] That practice, in turn, reinforced the belief that made it possible. The more historians wrote about past worlds, the more The Past became real as a separate world. But as various crises of our times impinge upon identities thought to be long established or silent, we move closer to the era when professional historians will have to position themselves more clearly within the present, lest politicians, magnates, or ethnic leaders alone write history for them.

Such positions need not be fixed, nor should they imply the ideological manipulation of empirical evidence. Practicing historians who advocate a history aware of its purpose—from the presentists of the first half of this century to the leftists of the 1970s—never suggested such manipulation.[13] Most of these advocates, however, assumed the possibility of either an unambiguous narrative, or of an unambiguous present. With varying degrees of certitude, they envisioned that narratives about the past could expose with utmost clarity positions solidly anchored in the present. We now know that narratives are made of silences, not all of which are deliberate or even perceptible as such within the time of their

production. We also know that the present is itself no clearer than the past.

None of these discoveries entails an absence of purpose. They certainly do not entail an abandonment of the search and defense of values that distinguish the intellectual from a mere scholar.[14] Positions need not be eternal in order to justify a legitimate defense. To miss this point is to bypass the historicity of the human condition. Any search for eternity condemns us to the impossible choice between fiction and positivist truth, between nihilism and fundamentalism, which are two sides of the same coin. As we move through the end of the millenium, it will be increasingly tempting to seek salvation by faith alone, now that most deeds seem to have failed.

But we may want to keep in mind that deeds and words are not as distinguishable as we often presume. History does not belong only to its narrators, professional or amateur. While some of us debate what history is or was, others take it in their own hands.

Epilogue

I was looking for Columbus, but I knew that he would not be there. Down by the shore, Port-au-Prince exposed its wounds to the sun; and Harry Truman Boulevard, once the most beautiful street of Haiti, was now a patchwork of potholes.

The boulevard was built for the bicentennial celebration of Port-au-Prince, which Truman helped finance right between his launching of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the start of the Korean War. Now, it looked like a war zone with no memory of the celebrations of which it had been the center. Only a few of the statues erected for the occasion remained. Its fountains had dried up under two Duvaliers. Its palm trees had shrunk as had Haiti itself.

I turned in front of the French Institute, a living monument to the impact of French culture on the Haitian elites, and drove toward the U.S. embassy, a center of power of a different order. Above a mountain of sandbags, a helmeted black G.I. watched nonchalantly as a crowd of half-naked boys bathed in a puddle left by yesterday's rain. He had probably come with the occupying forces that helped restore President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power in 1994. The story I was looking for went back to nine years earlier. I drove by.

I stopped the car at safe enough distance from the embassy and started a slow walk on the boulevard. On the buildings around the

post office, conflicting graffittis asked the U.S. forces both to stay and to go home. I spotted a statue lying behind a fence across the street. A peddling artist stood next to it, selling paintings and crafts. I greeted the man and asked him if he knew where the statue of Christopher Columbus was.

I had vague memories of that statue. I only remembered its existence from my adolescent wanderings. The few images I could summon came from Graham Greene's "The Comedians." It was under the watchful eyes of Columbus that the heroes of that story, later played by Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, consummated their illicit love. But the bust on the grass was no Columbus. The painter confirmed my doubts. "No," he said, "this is a statue of Charlemagne Péralte."

Péralte was the leader of a nationalist army that fought the first occupation of Haiti by the United States in the 1920s. From the pictures the Marines took of him after they had crucified him on a door, I knew that he was a thin dark man. The bust on the grass was visibly that of a white male, rather stocky. "You're sure this is Péralte?" I asked again. "Sure is Péralte," replied the painter. I moved closer and read the inscription. The sculpture was a bust of Harry Truman.

"Where is the Columbus one?" I asked.

"I don't know. I am not from Port-au-Prince," replied the man. "Maybe it is the one that used to be near the water."

I walked to the place he indicated. No statue was to be found. The pedestal was still there, but the sculpture itself was missing. Someone had inscribed on the cement: "Charlemagne Péralte Plaza." Truman had become Péralte and Péralte had replaced Columbus.

I stood there for another half hour, asking each passerby if they knew what had happened to the Columbus statue. I knew the story: I was in Port-au-Prince when Columbus disappeared. I just wanted confirmation, a test of how public memory works and how history takes shape in a country with the lowest literacy rate on this side of the Atlantic.

I was almost ready to give up when a young man recapped for me the events I had first heard about in 1986. In that year, at the fall of Jean-Claude Duvalier's dictatorship, the most miserable people of Haiti's capital had taken to the streets. They had thrown their anger at every monument that they associated with the dictatorship. A number of statues had been broken into pieces; others were simply removed from their bases. This was how Truman came to find himself on the grass.

Columbus had a different fate, for reasons still unknown to me. Perhaps the illiterate demonstrators associated his name with colonialism. The mistake, if mistake there was, is understandable: the word "kolon" in Haitian means both Columbus and a colonist. Perhaps they associated him with the ocean from which he came. At any rate, when the angry crowd from the neighboring shanty towns rolled down the Harry Truman Boulevard, they took the statue of Columbus, removed it from its pedestal, and dumped it into the sea.