"Truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and advisor to the present, and the future's counselor." **–Cervantes *Don Quixote* quoted in Jorge Luis Borges "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote"**

No historian can erase her own presence from the history she writes. In fact, it is far less common these days to find historians who claim we should even try. There was perhaps a time when the individual voice, the motives, and the personal choices that historians make in pursuing their craft might seemed to irreversibly soil a work of otherwise immaculate and timeless perfection if they ever leaked to the surface. Now, if anything, the reverse tendency has gained sway. To conceal the inevitable touch of the historian is either seen as a form of deceit—aimed as much at ourselves as it is at others—or it is a function of our language and our times.

With a historicist's realization that, "History does not belong to us, we belong to it," we inevitably question what objectivity means in the absence of timelessness.[1] The more embedded we recognize ourselves to be in the concerns of the present, the legacies of our past, and the more enslaved to language we find ourselves, the more our foggy window looking out onto history seems like a fun house mirror. Its distorted reflection is enough to haunt some of us in our nightmares, for in its returning gaze we see the abyss of nihilism and a relativist's despair.

All is not lost, say some, and even our own temporally and linguistically embedded natures can still claim some form of lordship over the past. With a belief in a modest progressivism, an ever so subtle condescension towards any and all that preceded us, we may still salvage the integrity of our research. If we believe that if we cannot fully grasp our own bounds and limitations, we can at least judge the work of those historians who came before us with a modicum of clarity. We are professionals who are confident that our work is the best that has yet to emerge. We are blessed not only with more facts to compare but more perspectives to incorporate into an ever so slightly richer and more complete—if ever incomplete—account.

What should happen however, if this confidence in our own progress is completely torn from us? What if the ever-growing storehouse of facts and ever-

[1] Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 245, cited in David Harlan *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 9.

proliferating perspectives have as often torn down our foundations as it has led to something creatively synthetic, constructive, and unquestionably superior?

If our foggy window does not look out at all the past at once, perhaps it is more like a train of passengers all continually repeating the same journey but seated in various parts of a segregated train. We are all peering out foggy windows of different sizes and watching two very different landscapes pass quickly by us on opposite sides of the train. We sleep and eat at different times, missing the view as we do. Some of us compare notes, some of us don't, but unfortunately for us, even the landscape itself changes ever so slightly each time we make the journey. Objects drop in and out of sight from the train's path or are obscured by mists or the blinding light of a rising sun. Or perhaps it is mostly the weather, but even the hills, they wear away.

This, a reformed moderate historian like Thomas L. Haskell, can claim, is far cry from the glorious construction scene in a valley of Shinar. There we once sought to, "build a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world."[2] Scholars like Haskell gladly admit they do not believe that, "each scholar contributes his brick to a steadily accumulating edifice of unchallengeable knowledge…"[3] Instead, finding ourselves scattered all over the world, we seek most of all to speak to each other.

For Haskell, this means that historians must adopt the virtue of "detachment" (a poorly chosen word) which, "functions…not by draining us of passion, but by helping to channel our intellectual passions in such a way as to insure collision with rival perspectives." If our work cannot serve eternity, let it at least serve each other. It is this literal collision between rivals which will give birth to something new, or at least the death of something old.

This collision is achieved through powerful argument. By its construction and the "detachment" which helps us anticipate a rival's objections we may show a deep respect for our opponents. "Nothing is more rhetorically powerful than this," says Haskell, and we will thus have the power to move and persuade those who read it.[4] In this way

[2] Genesis 11:4. Speiser, E. A. trans. *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1964), 74
[3] Thomas L. Haskell, "Objectivity is Not Neutrality: Rhetoric vs. Practice in Peter Novick's That Noble Dream" *History and Theory* Vol. 29 No. 2 (May, 1990), 130.
[4] *Ibid.,* 135

Haskell has interestingly united rhetoric and logic. It is logic, in the form of powerful argument, together with the "detachment" to anticipate counter-argument, which to Haskell are the royal couple of rhetoric. When these are then combined with the virtue of honesty, we can ward against any attempts at sophistry. Haskell's epistemological vocabulary, now tied as it is to the vague currency of Aristotelian virtue ethics, is already a significant retreat from the bolder correspondence theories of old. However, to go too far and deny the virtue of detachment, "is to defame the species."[5]

The defamation of our species, or rather, the degradation of history is not, for the intellectual historian David Harlan, due to any rejection of detachment. In his *The Degradation of American History*, Harlan throws Haskell into the pit of moderate pragmatists and professionalists together with James Kloppenberg, David Hollinger, and Joyce Appleby. There they are treated like gutless traditionalists who run for metaphysical cover as soon as their initial concessions to critical theory reveal any consequences.

For David Harlan, the degradation of history hasn't come, as an unsuspecting reader might have assumed from the title or even the introduction, from the epistemological plunder of poststructuralism. Harlan has no serious quarrel with the theories rejected by both traditional reconstructionists, who believe in an unproblematic historical reconstruction of the past, and the moderates, who either embrace some flavor of pragmatism or the conventions of an intellectual community. Harlan critiques them both but can often be dismissive of their approaches without giving them extended consideration. He opens his discussion of the Appelby et al. approach in *Telling the Truth About History* by saying that, "reading their account is something like watching a collection of geese try to hatch a duck's egg—uneventful, as it turns out, but not altogether uninstructive."[6] He will only be persuasive in his handling of these approaches with those of us who already have deep doubts about them. However, I get the impression that these chapters serve more to sever his own connection to these thinkers who see history primarily as a battle between "objective" historians, however defined, and crazed relativists on the other.

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[5] *Ibid.,* 133.
[6] David Harlan *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 96.

What makes Harlan's account so refreshing is that he is much more interested in what history we can *create* in the wake of these theoretical battles. In other words, how did these theoretical changes in the field affect actual intellectual history writing (the field he usually restricts himself to) and what kind of intellectual history *should* we write in the future? Many younger students of history, such as myself, are heavily influenced by poststructuralist theory and the sometimes destructive historiography it has bred. However, many of us are wondering how we are supposed to pick up the pieces. How are we supposed to create something fresh and new in its aftermath?

For Harlan, the real battle is not between reconstructionists, moderates, and poststructuralists—a battle that for him is essentially over. He redirects his attack along a different axis: the contrast between "contextualist" approaches to history and "presentist" approaches that aren't afraid of decontextualizing or recontextualizing writers of the past. He decides emphatically in favor of the latter, and wants us to regenerate history as a practice of moral reflection. Stop this nonsense about putting everything into its historical context or reducing everything to a one-dimensional hegemonic discourse, and let us unashamedly pursue (intellectual) history as a creative and constructive way to confront our present day problems. "History is a line we ourselves must rig up, to a past we ourselves must populate."[7] In this conclusion to the introduction, the skeptic who excuses herself briefly from the euphoric celebration of historical creativity may want to ask if there are any limits at all on this act of "populating."

While Harlan's most bitter words are reserved for historians who want to salvage objectivity or a professionalism based on common traditions or practices, his primary target is really "contextualist" and "radical contextualist" historians who occupy both sides of the epistemological divide. Whether it is Quentin Skinner wanting to recover an author's "primary intentions," by immersing ourselves in their times, Sacvan Bercovitch's reducing the Puritan (and in turn all American) imagination to its fundamental substructure, or the influence of Foucault on a generation of discourse historians, all of these approaches share something in common. Instead of connecting the writings of the past directly to our own and drafting (Harlan uses the word "adopting") an "ancestor" for participation in an anachronistic but richly creative intellectual dialogue

[7] *Ibid.,* xxxiii.

about values, these approaches all seem more concerned with identifying the language, influences and environment of a writer in their historical context. This approach to intellectual history favors a form of analysis that encourages students to read "complex texts as if they were bills of lading,"[8] and asks intellectual historians to participate in a, "revolution that devoured its own subjects, for 'the history of discourse' ended up reducing earlier thinkers to little more than place markers in a profusion of proliferating discourses."[9]

Interestingly, Harlan denounces this contextualist approach not so much by refutation, which would perhaps please the likes of Thomas Haskell, but by a different rhetorical move, "It is a history that exposes our limitations but does nothing to help us transcend them; it reveals our depleted imagination but does nothing to nourish our potential."[10] Harlan believes that our fascination with historical context, despite the deep political convictions which often motivate the discourse historian's desire to "unmask" the hegemonies of the past are simply not as useful (an idea itself deeply impregnated by pragmatist influences) for us in dealing with the problems of our own current times. For him, such approaches use an, "impoverished notion of hegemony that blights whatever it touches."[11] Even when poststructuralist approaches to history give voice to the unheard, deconstruct previously essentialist identities, expose the fiction of a timeless canon, and multiply the fragments of our history, Harlan shows how this can often lead to sense of despair over the inability to synthesize.[12]

Harlan's dream for intellectual history would have us looking to the past, as we once did, for inspiration and moral reflection. He wants us to find those writers who inspire us and wrench them away from the prison of their own time in order to put them together with other thinkers. He sees great potential for making these writers talk to each other and interrogate each other, though they stretch across time and place. He wants,

> A history concerned not with dead authors but with living books, not with returning earlier writers to their historical contexts but with reading historical works in new and

[8] *Ibid.,* 192.
[9] *Ibid.,* 4.
[10] *Ibid.,* 45.
[11] *Ibid.,* 46.
[12] This is especially clear in Chapter 3 on feminist history and the example of Joan Scott. See for example, *Ibid.*, 72.

> unexpected contexts, not with reconstructing the past but with providing the critical medium in which valuable works from the past might survive their past..."[13]

How would we choose such works? He suggests borrowing the idea of "readerly" (*lisible*) and "writerly" (*scriptable*) texts from Barthes, or the distinction between "complex works" and "documents" from Dominick LaCapra, or Frank Kermode's conception of canonical works whose meanings share a degree of indeterminacy and which have the capacity to let us see things we could not have seen before. From these we might be able to, "patch together a provisional working criterion for identifying the books with which intellectual history might concern itself."[14]

Harlan commends a number of writers, such John Patrick Diggins, Henry Louise Gates (who calls the method "productive juxtaposition"), Richard Rorty (who calls it "rational reconstruction"), Elaine Showalter, and Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution* for already having the courage to embrace this recontextualizing approach. In fact, most of *The Degradation of American History* is itself an example of the kind of history Harlan has in mind. Throughout his book he has shamelessly thrown together, much to the annoyance of his critics, an amazing breadth of literary figures like Melville, religious thinkers like Augustine, philosophers from Kant and Hegel to Gadamer, Hayden White, Derrida, and historians of all flavors.[15] Even when the connections between them seem incredibly tenuous, Harlan is adamant that historians must, "set out not merely to *understand* the writers of the past but to *reeducate* them"[16]

Earlier I suggested that the skeptic might want to know what limits there are to Harlan's imperative to "populate" the past. We might ask the same about the limits of "reeducation." Harlan spends a whole chapter chronicling Hayden White's own difficult

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[13] *Ibid.,* 31.
[14] *Ibid.,* 19.
[15] See both the review by Kerwin Lee Klein in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser. 56:2, 423, in which the reviewer suspects, "readers will wonder at his claims that Jacques Derrida belongs to the same strain of 'Augustinian piety' that runs from Jonathan Edwards through Abraham Lincoln and that the writings of John Calvin prefigure post-structuralism." and Casey N. Blake in *The Journal of American History* 86:1 (June 1999), 200, "Traditionalists who cannot abide Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault and poststructuralists who do not read the Puritans may well wonder how they ended up allies in such an insurgency." All the reviews, including one in *History and Theory* 39:3 (October 2000), 405-416 are fairly critical, but often seem to have missed the fact that Harlan is openly practicing what he is preaching, radical though his position may be, that a text, "at the very moment of its inception, has already been cast upon the waters." Harlan *Ibid*., 21.
[16] Harlan, *Ibid.,* 25.

attempt to respond to critics who claimed his structuralist philosophy of history would permit such outrages as a "comic" history of the Holocaust.[17]

So where are the limits to be found for Harlan? We have already seen him suggest guidelines for the "adoption" of our intellectual predecessors and the establishment of an openly fictional intra-canonical dialogue. How far can we go in populating or reeducating these adopted giants? "We all know," he answers, "from our own experience as readers, that certain texts resist certain readings." This is, I'm afraid, as far as he will go on the matter. There is nothing to be found about what *kinds* of texts resist what *kind* of reading. Are they always successful in resistance? Or depending on the time and person, can we "overcome" the resistance of a text in order to read it as we like, if, for example, it was urgently pressing for our present needs?

This return to an epistemological realm is not welcome to Harlan. When he chides Haskell by telling him, "he should stop trying to formulate an abstract, high-level, pseudoscientific theory of historical interpretation and start ransacking the past for men and women whose thoughts and lives exemplify the moral values he considers important...Haskell's standards for ensuring objectivity would offer precious little help in making choices like these, which are, after all, moral and aesthetic choices."[18] On the last point, he is right to be sure, but there is no reason to suggest why Haskell would disagree. Nor would Max Weber who, in his essays "Science as a Vocation," and "'Objectivity' in Social Sciences and Social Policy" argued that these moral and aesthetic choices, so necessary in determining the object and direction of study, were perfectly compatible with a scholar remarkably similar to Haskell's "detached" historian who recognizes inconvenient facts.[19]

Haskell has recently reviewed a collection of papers on this dispute which includes philosopher Richard Rorty's most recent contribution to the debate.[20] Rorty's position seems to overlap in many ways with Haskell on the very same points that David Harlan has rejected in his consideration of the "professionalists" in *The Degradation of*

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[17] See *Ibid.*, Chapter 5, "The Return of the Moral Imagination" Overall, Harlan is gentle in his critique of Hayden, who has earned a place in the second part of his book, "The Renewal of American Historical Writing."
[18] *Ibid.*, 95.
[19] Haskell quotes Weber in "'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy" on this issue to open his most recent review article, "Objectivity: Perspective as Problem and Solution" *History and Theory* 43 (October 2004), 341.
[20] Thomas L. Haskell "Objectivity: Perspective as Problem and Solution" *History and Theory* 43 (October 2004), 341.

American History. In the collection of papers reviewed by Haskell, *Historians and Social Values*, Rorty allies himself somewhat with Weber scholar Wolfgang Mommsen by agreeing to Mommsen's use of *Wissenschaftliche Distanz*, a concept that seems very close to the kind of "detachment" that Haskell called for in his 1990 essay on Peter Novick.[21] Rorty, however, sees this as, "another word for what I have been calling honesty—for the ability to distinguish between one's own moral identity and one's responsibility to one's fellow historians, and to one's readers."[22] This is interesting, since Harlan looks to Rorty's anti-realist pragmatism for an unfettered freedom to manufacture new dialogues between intellectual predecessors that can be wrenched from their context, and of course, his "critique of objectivity."[23]

Rorty's anti-realism hasn't changed, but this most recent essay suggests that he doesn't see this his epistemological skepticism to be incompatible with concepts of detachment and especially honesty which lie at the heart of the professionalist moderate argument for a kind of "objectivity" that Harlan believed to be the critical target of Rorty's work. Of course, Harlan can claim that Rorty's earlier works have already been "cast afloat in the water" and that he is free to interpret it freely without reference to its author and his newly elaborated (or changed) views.

However, it is not obvious to me how conceding that the moral element guides the "ransacking" of the past is in any way incompatible with promoting a theory of historical interpretation or a Weberian approach to history. Such a theory might be useful if Harlan is to explain how some works *resist* some readings. Neither is it entirely clear to me why discourse history, or other forms of contextualist history are necessarily less useful to

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[21] I regret to say that I have not yet gotten a hold of a copy of Joep Leerssen and Ann Rigney eds. *Historians and Social Values* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000) so this is based on Haskell's portrayal and quotes from Rorty's essay in his revew essay *Ibid* rather than a reading of Rorty's essay itself. See Haskell *Ibid*.,

[22] The 1990 essay was mentioned above, Thomas L. Haskell, "Objectivity is Not Neutrality: Rhetoric vs. Practice in Peter Novick's That Noble Dream" *History and Theory* Vol. 29 No. 2 (May, 1990). Haskell citing Rorty in "Objectivity: Perspective as Problem and Solution", 349. On the same page there is a long footnote number 12 in which Haskell details how he believes he differs from Rorty. While in practice they don't disagree on much, Haskell sides more with a Peirce pragmatism which is ultimately realist at its base. Haskell argues that Rorty has, "done his best to demote [Peirce] from the front ranks of the pragmatic tradition," in favor of his own more radical anti-realist pragmatism. I think Haskell has never really confronted some of the consequences of poststructuralist theory and believes that he can have his cake an eat it too, as Harlan also claims in Harlan *Ibid*., 86. If he wants to go back to "business as usual" I think Rorty has a much clearer understanding of how to do this without abandoning all theoretical consistency. The original quote by Rorty is apparently in Leerssen *Ibid*, 203.

[23] Harlan *Ibid*., 153. "Rorty's importance for historians rests on two central points: his crtique of objectivity and, growing out of that, his belief that intellectual history is mainly a matter of finding intellectual predecessors and lining them up in chronological order."

moral reflection than the recontextualized intellectual dialogue Harlan proposes. "Unmasking" of the past and revealing oppressive discourses where they exist can be described as a form of moral lamentation, a kind of social regret, and can often inspire deep reflection in a reader. I was certainly inspired to this kind of deeply *moral* reflection on reading a discourse history such as Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

As long as we do not descend into complete despair and suggest that we are incapable of escaping from the "immanence" of a particular discourse, cannot the two approaches coexist productively? Must we deny the existence of discursive limits in order to celebrate "writerly" (scriptable) texts and their capacity for indeterminate meanings?

Harlan ridicules Haskell's adoption of the principles of fairness, honesty, and detachment. It is certainly easy to see how these vague and epistemologically hollow concepts will not salvage the "noble dream" of objective history. However, Harlan has little better to offer in this regard, and as we have seen, Rorty has betrayed him.

In fact, Harlan has his own set of virtues that he wants to promote. Instead of fairness, honesty and detachment, Harlan would have the historian be more like the Muse. He believes that what history needs today are, "alert, responsive, and resourceful readers,"[24] who approach their work with a "measure of tact, insight, and thoughtfulness…"[25]

All of this, however, is to focus too much on inconsistencies in Harlan's critique of the moderates who have come before him. However, this occupied only the "ground clearing" phase of his work. The laudable goal of *The Degradation of American History* is to promote a creative and constructive approach to intellectual history and shift the debate away from the waging wars of epistemology. In this, I think he has more than adequately demonstrated the value of a decontextualized consideration of texts. He is right that many historians will balk at abandoning context in favor of a temporally and culturally liberated inter-textual dialogue. However, they might ask, justly I believe, whether we should call this practice, however productive, history.

[24] *Ibid*., 192.
[25] *Ibid*., 207.

I have no qualms at all with a total freedom in "populating" the past or in reeducating the heroes of our texts and agree wholeheartedly with Harlan that this has powerful rhetorical capabilities and can change our outlook on the world. The heroes we populate the past with need not have existed at all, "out there" in the "real" past. Harlan gives a perfect example of this, when he makes use of Jorge Luis Borges's wonderful story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" to make a point about the absurdity of a radical contextualism.[26]

The story's narrator reports on his inspection of the personal files and publications of friend of his, an author named Pierre Menard. The narrator lists in detail all the publications of this completely fictional author which range from "A monograph on Leibniz's Characteristica universalis" to "A technical article on the possibility of improving the game of chess, eliminating one of the rook's pawns. Menard proposes, recommends, discusses, and finally rejects this innovation."[27] He details his correspondence with the now deceased author about the latter's greatest masterpiece: Menard's incredible *word by word* rewrite of several chapters of *Don Quixote*. After initially contemplating the rewriting of the classic by immersing himself in the historical context of the work's time, and forgetting all that thas happens since, Menard abandons this as being too easy. Instead, he decides to rewrite the work as a man of his own times. While identical in every way to the original classic, the narrator finds the few chapters completed of the new version to be a far richer product. When Menard writes (in words identical to Cervantes) "truth, whose mother is history" the narrator marvels, "History, the mother of truth: the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an inquiry into reality but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened."[28]

Borges, whose fictional narrator is writing about a fictional author who wrote a fictional book, has written words that Harlan, the historian and philosopher of history himself might have written. Borges, the writer, the essayist, a great literary figure of our own century, has written about exactly the kind recontextualizing work that Harlan admires, for Menard's fictional rewrite of *Don Quixote* is read as the product of a new

[26] Harlan *Ibid*., 8.
[27] Jorge Luis Borges, Andrew Hurley trans. *Collected Fictions* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998), 89.
[28] *Ibid*., 94.

age, a new linguistic and historical context. What then separates the work of historical fiction, the fictional book review, or any of the experimental genres that Borges has boldly explored from the work of a historian? This is a question that Harlan did not answer.