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INVITATION



Practicing theory and theorizing practice

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ABSTRACT

History offers the chance to act as an author and actor at the same time. It works as a great stage on which the theatre of the world plays out. The historian has the privilege of being apart from and a part of history. The historian thus functions as both author and actor, and the historical operation should always combine theory *and* practice. Theoretical reflection allows us to delve into the reality of historical authorship, connecting us to the present from which we try to access the past. Historical practice brings us closer to the protagonists of the past, trying to improve the world we live in. When historians practice both theory and practice, they are immunized from an archaeological history that is not relevant for its society as well as from a critical history conditioned by ideological, reductionist, or manipulative presentism. In this sense, being open to practicing history and theorizing the practice of history makes historians more realistic in their approaches to the past and in their theories of *how* to approach that past.

KEYWORDS Historiography; autobiography; authorship; theory and Practice; historical Criticism; presentism; classics

There is no theory that is not in fact a carefully concealed part of the theorist's own life
(Paul Valéry)

I

When I was at school, I remember being fascinated by history because it seemed to offer the chance to act as an author and actor at the same time. A vivid image from Alfred Hitchcock's *Topaz* (1969) illustrated this for me, when I saw the film for the first time: in the background of a busy airport scene, Hitchcock appears in a wheelchair, pushed by a woman. His serenity contrasts with the fast-paced action that surrounds him. He sees an acquaintance, gets up to greet him, and they walk off together. The action continues. Hitchcock was inside and outside of the action.

This is an example of fiction, but I noted the same attitude among chroniclers while working on medieval Catalan historiography (Aurell 2012). The kings James the Conqueror and Peter the Ceremonious *entered*

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history by writing their autobiographies (Soldevila 1983). The chronicler Bernat Desclot introduced himself in his own narration as he testified to the king being wounded by an arrow in battle: ‘This is a testimony of him who is telling this in this book, who saw the King’s saddle and the iron which stayed there’ (Desclot 1949–1951, 5, 85–86). They were following the autobiographic impulse inherited from classical historiography and from the Gospels, in which the apostle and evangelist John declares that ‘this is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true’ (John 21: 24). As another medieval Catalan chronicler, Ramon Muntaner, explains: ‘I recount these things in order that it should be known that I saw the Lord King [James the Conqueror] and that I can tell what I saw of him and what I have part in, for I do not wish to meddle but with what was done in my time’ (Soldevila 1983, 669).

I could also perceive the same impulse to embed oneself in historical narrative among the hundreds of historians who have written their autobiography in the last two centuries (Aurell 2015), most of them perhaps following A. J. P. Taylor’s idea: ‘Every historian should, I think, write an autobiography’ (1983, ix).

I will return to this first motivation in the course of this article – and to its theoretical and practical implications – because it stands at the core of my dedication to history. But I had, in my years as a student, a second impulse for entering our discipline and being part of what it analyses. I imagined that history was like the great stage on which the theatre of the world played out. I did not know, at that time, that this image was used by the symbolic anthropologists who I would eventually read, decades later, while working on my project on royal self-coronations (Aurell 2020), especially Clifford Geertz’s *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (1980) and Victor Turner’s *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982). Neither did I know at the time that the idea of the ‘theatre of the world’ had been explained by the philosophers and playwrights of antiquity. Yet this image captivated me in those high school years while reading the classics of the Spanish Golden Age. Lope de Vega used it in his *Lo fingido Verdadero* [‘What you Pretend Has Become Real’] (1620). Calderón de la Barca elevated it as the central theme of his *auto sacramental* (a unique form of Spanish religious drama), *El Gran Teatro del Mundo* [‘The Great Theatre of the World’] (1655). But it was Cervantes, in 1615, who first introduced it in one of the witty dialogues between Quixote and Sancho:

‘Indeed there is no comparison which presents to us more truly what we are and what we ought to be than the play and the players.’ [...] ‘Now the same thing,’ said Don Quixote, ‘happens in comedy and the dealings of this world, where some play emperors, others pontiffs, and finally all the characters can be put into a comedy; but on reaching the end, which is when life ends, death

strips them of all the clothes that distinguished them, and they are left equal in the tomb.'

Sancho takes it upon himself, as usual, to bring his master down a peg or two, and provides another interesting image of the history of the world:

'A fine comparison,' said Sancho, 'although not so new that I haven't heard it on many different occasions, like the one about the game of chess, where every piece has its particular role while the game lasts, and when it ends they are all mixed and shuffled together, and find their way into a bag, which is how life finds its way into the tomb.' (Cervantes 1963, 539)

The idea of being a part of and apart from history at the same time, and the metaphor of history as theatre of the world continue to fascinate me because they strike me as a realistic and nourishing image of the relations between history and literature, between the past and the present, between the humanities and social sciences, between the historical and practical past, between archaeologism and presentism, and between practice and theory, with all their implications for the work of historians. But I soon realized – in a shift closer to Sancho's realism than Quixote's idealism – that history was more complex than I had first imagined. The great drama of history develops from two mutually isolated scenes which barely intersect: the past in which the historical actors perform and the present from which history is written. I have always thought that the theoretical and practical complexity of history derives from the communication gap between these two scenes, which only join symbolically in the horizon line that represents the imagination of the historian acting as author.

With the passage of time, I have come to realise that my dedication to the theory *and* practice of history has given rise to that dual condition of historian as both author *and* actor. Theoretical reflection allows us to delve into the reality of historical authorship, connecting us to the present from which we try to access the past. Historical practice brings us closer to the protagonists of the past, binding us to the past we investigate – in my case, the Middle Ages – to try to improve our present. I periodically reread Edward Gibbon's *Memoirs of My Life* (1795) and like to reacquaint myself with the revelatory words he wrote concerning his own intellectual itinerary: 'I *know*, by experience, that from my early youth I aspired to the character of an historian.' (Gibbon 1900, 143). I appreciate Gibbon's emphasis on the *know*, and the recognition that this *knowledge* has come to him through experience, not speculation. I think then of my own itinerary, for that is the benefit of reading great historians' autobiographies like this: 'the magical opportunity of entering another life is what really sets us thinking about our own', as Jill K. Conway puts it (1999, 18). I realize then that my vocation as a historian has been governed by this passion to understand the repercussions of the attempt to draw together, without merging them, the past and

the present. And that is not possible without a measured balance between theory and practice. The historian is not just a scientist whose aim is to recover the past in the most objective way possible, but also an artist who tries to improve the present through his/her historical authorship.

I am convinced that this desire to build bridges between the past and the present lies at the root of my inclination for medievalism. If you are a passionate citizen of Barcelona, you admire daily the beautiful corners of the *barri gòtic* (Gothic Quarter) that outshine the touristy places highlighted in the guides or chosen by tour operators. I remember that, on my doctoral-research mornings in the Barcelona Cathedral Archive, I had the privilege of being assigned a table on one of the upper side-galleries that literally opened out onto the nave of that majestic cathedral. I worked at a large table made of magnificent wood that seemed imbued with a centuries-old antiquity. When I needed to give my eyes a break, weary of laboriously deciphering the devilish cursives of the old manuscripts, I would look up and admire the wonderful Gothic church nave. Harmonious, medieval-style music also reached my ears, played by the itinerant performers who gathered around the cathedral precincts. I smelled the deeply *medieval* aroma of the oakwood table, blended with the manuscripts I had in front of me and the fragrance of the incense from the liturgy being performed at the distant altar. I have never wanted to let go of that intense sensory experience, because it seemed to me an accurate illustration of the responsibility that historians have to be sensitive to the reality of *our* world, which allows us to study that *other* world, the past, with greater realism.

My sensorial experiences in the *barri gòtic* and its archives transported me to a medieval world that no longer seemed so remote or distant. My own neighbourhood, Sarrià, even if swallowed up by greater Barcelona a few decades earlier, had nevertheless preserved intact the urban structure and commercial vitality of the bustling town it had been in the Middle Ages. The choice of subject for my doctoral thesis ('Merchant Culture in Fifteenth-Century Barcelona,' Aurell 1996) also had something presentist about it, in that it allowed me to connect with that 'bourgeois spirit' that I saw reflected in the part of my family that were textile industrialists in Terrassa, one of the most prosperous areas of Catalonia. My subsequent choice of research topics, both theoretical and practical, has been driven, more or less consciously, by some direct connection with the present. I hope this has enabled me to inject enough *passion* into my research to give it the breath of life, but without compromising the 'pastness of the past' – for which robust theoretical armour is required.

II

Two memories from my university student days corroborate my early interest in theory and the subsequent interdisciplinary dialogue with

philosophy and literary criticism. I remember with pleasure, and not without melancholy, a seminar that we organized with fellow students (one of whom was the early-modernist Joan-Pau Rubiés) on Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. I can no longer recall the criteria that led us to make Heidegger the focus of attention, although I am sure that youthful idealism counted for more than the realism we would acquire with the passing of time. I am not sure, however, that we managed to get much out of the text, since our enthusiasm surpassed our knowledge. But this experience made me realise the importance of historians appreciating the theoretical tools and sophisticated argumentation available to them from philosophy. Today, I have been able to relive that experience, with perhaps greater benefit, thanks to the ongoing seminars we hold with some philosopher colleagues at my university. Joint readings, week after week, of works such as Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and Michel Foucault's *On the Government of the Living* have convinced me, yet again, of the need for all historians to develop theoretical and interdisciplinary perspectives as a necessary complement to their daily contact with the primary sources.

I also remember the very vivid impression made on me as a budding historian by a course that was nominally on 'medieval literature'. It was taught by Martí de Riquer, a prestigious Romance scholar. To our surprise, Riquer devoted the whole course to commentary on (early modern) Quixote rather than the expected medieval topic. I can think of no other course I attended with such interest. I admired the way Riquer managed to connect the witty stories of Quixote and Sancho with models from medieval literature and his way of leaping forward to demonstrate their relevance to the present. His discussion shifted between the past and the present, decoded the key insights into their relationship, and revealed their hidden arcana – without losing direct contact with the solid platform of his primary sources. That was an early insight – because it would be some years before I read Hayden White's *Metahistory* and before I began working with my colleagues in literature – into how literature can illuminate history and vice versa on a practical level, and how literary criticism can enrich the study of history theoretically. As White later explained this relation:

With the fact-fiction distinction, [Georg] Iggers sees the relation between history and literature as one of opposition – in the way that Ranke did when he opposed his own notion of history writing to the 'romances' of Sir Walter Scott. Iggers seems to identify all 'literature' with fiction, failing to recognize that there is much literary writing that is not fictional and much fictional writing that is not literary. Iggers – quite unhistorically – appears to think that 'literature' means 'fictional' writing. I think that Iggers would agree that there is a great deal of 'literary writing' whose aim is the 'realistic representation of reality' and to which the majority of the great classics of 'Western'

historiography belong – from Herodotus and Thucydides through Livy and Tacitus to Eusebius and Procopius to Machiavelli and Guicciardini and beyond these to Voltaire, Gibbon, and, yes, even Ranke, Treitschke, Mommsen, Burckhardt, Huizinga, and a host of others. (White 2000, 403)

My negotiation with philosophy and literature brought me to a continuing revision of my historiographical hypotheses, developing a hyper-critical psychology against the dominant currents. In my undergraduate and post-graduate years during the 1980s and 1990s, I rejected Marxism because I found its economic reductionism and materialism unrealistic and simplistic. I had not become a historian for that. The reality of the past – and the present! – seemed too complex to reduce it to rather simple dichotomies.

The problem was that Marxism was the hegemonic perspective in Spanish historiography at that time, both as an ideology and a methodological tool. This attitude, which was for its time historiographically speaking rather anachronistic, is explained by the peculiar contextual circumstances of those years of Spanish transition to democracy. On the one hand, socialism and communism had led the anti-Francoist struggle, which endowed them with enormous and lasting prestige in Spanish university and intellectual circles. It was a deserved political acknowledgement, but the acritical assumption of Marxist historiographical postulates seriously damaged intellectual debate and free thought. I rebelled. On the other hand, Spanish historiography was once again proving reluctant to adopt new ideas. Historical materialism continued to hold considerable sway in Spain, even when it had been left behind in other Western traditions due to the impetus of various postmodern trends and turns. This historiographical *conservatism* has always had some advantages – above all, the solid heuristic training that history students receive in Spain – but it gave me a lot of headaches at the time. That is why I find myself obliged to confess that on occasion I betrayed my own anti-Marxist principles. I used to avail myself of the full protective cover afforded by the conceptual toolbox of historical materialism to give a good account of myself in some exams in which the Marxist orthodoxy of the professor militated against taking too many epistemological liberties. It paid off for me, but, once established in the discipline, I resolved to defend my own ideas from then on, regardless of passing fashions, deep-rooted conventions and popular currents.

With my reluctance to accept Marxism, I came to find myself adopting an anti-conventional stance in front of the hegemonic historiographical tendencies. This has always been very disconcerting for me, because I recognise myself as a rather measured person, heir to the classic *seny* that has traditionally been attributed to the Catalans – an untranslatable word, a mixture of weighing up and calculation, but one that approaches sensibleness, moderation, judgement and perhaps level-headedness. This non-conventionality has influenced my choice of subjects too. I recall the scepticism of some of

my colleagues when I told them that I was planning to study concepts such as durability, the classic and the canon of historiography – a topic I will discuss at some length later in this article. In an age when a hegemonic interest in genealogy prevails in the rupturist sense Michel Foucault gave it, my interest in themes that reveal what is continuous, permanent and stable in history – in this case, through an analysis of the unfolding of historical narratives in time – appears counter-cultural.

Deep down, my resistance to adopting the dominant historiographical trends derives from the conviction that they are never definitive. I like to ponder the ‘cutting edge of innovation’ image used by Lawrence Stone (1979) in his article on the return of the new narrative. Once a trend becomes hegemonic, it loses its pioneering status, genuine spirit and originality. Historiography advances partly due to the creativity generated from its margins but consolidates itself through the skill historians have in combining these innovations with tradition, rather than making a *tabula rasa* of what has gone before. When I write these lines, I am thinking of books by Carlo Ginzburg, Natalie Z. Davis, Clifford Geertz, Hayden White, Peter Burke, Robert A. Rosenstone or Gabrielle M. Spiegel – historians who have opened up new pathways in recent decades. Their intellectual itineraries reveal a balance between these three dualities: tradition and innovation, science and art, and theory and practice.

I have always seen the first of these pairs (tradition and innovation) reflected in the words of Bernard of Chartres (‘We are like dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants, and so able to see more and see farther than the ancients’), and in the *essential tension* between tradition and innovation suggested by Thomas Kuhn as the necessary platform for true scientific progress (1977, 226–239).

Ginzburg used a graphic image to illustrate the second of these dualities (science and art): the difficult equidistance of history between art and science:

The quantitative and anti-anthropocentric approach of the sciences of nature from Galileo onwards has placed human sciences in an unpleasant dilemma: they must either adopt a weak scientific standard so as to be able to attain significant results, or adopt a strong scientific standard to attain results of no great importance. (1979, 276)

Regarding the third – the balance between theory and practice – I have always found inspiring the way some historians have developed their own ideas through their own autobiography, such as Carolyn Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1987), Jill K. Conway’s *True North* (1997), Geoff Elley’s *Crooked Line* (2005) and Robert A. Rosenstone’s *Adventures of a Postmodern Historian* (2016) – four autobiographies I would like to see included in the bibliographies of introductory courses to history. These historians have excelled in their respective speciality, have shown that erudite

scholarship is enriched by theory, and have seen self-reflection as a support of their scholarship rather than an obstacle.

I think this aspiration of keeping the balance between theory and practice, tradition and innovation, and science and art, is conveyed in my hybridism, between the classical European traditions – more tilted towards an archaeological view of history – and the continuous waves of innovation coming from North America, more imbued with presentism. I have always thought that this contrast reflects the difference between a Europe that is at least two thousand years old and a younger North America – and the beneficial opportunity that arises from their complementarity, rather than their differences.

This brings to the problem of the relationship between the historical past, connatural to European historiography, and the practical past, congenital to North American historiography. This should not be a dilemma or contradiction. Historians able to blend theory and practice have shown respect for both the ‘irreducible pastness of the past’, in Spiegel’s words, and the inescapable presentism involved in the operation of writing history (2009, 1). Of course, this combination between the historical and the practical past is not easy to pull off, and the degree of dependence on either will be conditioned by the time of writing, the circumstances surrounding the historian, their ideological commitments, publishing connections, professional situation and family ties. But a basic tenet involves not losing sight of the tension between those two extremes – the ‘essential tension’ referred to by Kuhn.

All of this has resulted in an eclecticism in terms of my historiographical referents. On the one hand, I felt very proud to belong to historical traditions like the Catalan and Spanish, characterized by great heuristic soundness. I became used to reading the works of the finest authors and actors of the large-scale drama of the history of Spain: Rafael Altamira, Ramón Menéndez Pidal, Américo Castro, Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, Jesús Pabón, Vicente Cacho Viu, José Enrique Ruiz-Domènec. These studies were complemented by the solid scholarship of Catalan historiography, most of whose exponents were medievalists: Antoni Rubió i Lluch, Ramon d’Abadal, Ferran Soldevila, Jaume Vicens Vives and the already-mentioned Martí de Riquer.

But that local pride was compatible with my insatiable curiosity for the other great historiographical traditions, which I was gradually absorbing. Being in the margins of the mainstream of historiography excited an increasing interest for other traditions. During my first years of doctoral research, I was fascinated by French historiography. In the 1980s, all historiographical – and more specifically medieval – development seemed to come from France, especially via the contributions of Georges Duby and Jacques Le Goff. I recall with special pleasure my reading of Duby’s *Les trois ordres ou*

l'imaginaire du féodalisme (1979) and Le Goff's *La naissance du purgatoire* (1982). Duby and Le Goff's approaches were, moreover, complementary, corresponding to their different characters, as Peter Burke shrewdly drew out in his amusing comparative approach:

I wonder what kind of career these two men would have followed if they had lived in the Middle Ages that they spent so many years studying. I can imagine Duby most easily as the abbot of an important Benedictine monastery, and also its chronicler, while I see Le Goff as a Dominican friar combining lectures and disputations in a university with preaching tours elsewhere. (Burke 2015, 86)

Later on, Burke decided that he would prefer to identify Le Goff with the Franciscans rather than the Dominicans. When asked about it, he answered that Le Goff's egalitarian style made him think more of St Francis than St Thomas!

France, and perhaps more specifically Paris, provided me with most of the theoretical innovations I was absorbing in those formative years: Foucauldian poststructuralism, Derridean deconstructionism, Lyotard's diagnosis on postmodernity and the new hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. I remember that when Michel Vovelle's *Idéologies et Mentalités* (1982) was translated into Spanish, we organized graduate student seminars to analyse it in depth. They were exciting times historiographically, especially for medievalists and early modernists, when the history of mentalities played an essential role in the transition from the postwar *paradigms* to postmodernism. Among other things, I think that an obsession with the methodology of the third generation of *Annales* historians – and their journey 'from the cellar to the attic' (Burke 2015, 75), from the structures to the events – became firmly fixed in my mind and had a decisive influence not only on the election of my subjects but also on the design of my writing, reflected even in my structural habit of dividing them into 'three parts'.

My interest in French historiography was also clearly influenced by my older brother, Martin – or Martí, as we used to call him at home by his Catalan name. He went off to study history at the University of Aix-en-Provence, where Duby was teaching for his last years before making his definitive move to Paris. He transmitted to me his enthusiasm for a historiography that I have followed with great interest ever since, but which, admittedly, has lost part of its ability to lead the discipline, with the added obstacle of French having lost its status as a universal language. But its influence continues to be indisputable, and its historiographical legacy imperishable – I cannot imagine a medievalist without being inspired by March Bloch, Duby and Le Goff, or even today by Jean-Claude Schmitt or Philippe Buc.

The influence of British historiography came to me, by contrast, more through reading certain *Hispanists*, and usually from the field of early

modernism. I remember that reading John Elliott, Henry Kamen and Geoffrey Parker awoke in me a desire for more dynamic historical writing. I was also moved by their ability to thread the great and the small through their narrative, the historical anecdote with the major debates, the inductive detail with deductive abstraction, which I later saw reflected in influential works such as those of Simon Schama and Tony Judt – whose *Postwar* (2005) should be read by the new generations of historians, no matter their specialization. Finally, the works of Peter Burke, who was always well received in Spain and Latin America, introduced me to cultural and intellectual history, a sphere in which I have generally moved with much greater ease than in the socioeconomics of my historiographical origins.

But I was slowly coming to feel the influence of a more dynamic North American historiography. I have always thought that its theoretical activism and passion for change and innovation are good complements to the traditional training and appreciation for continuity that I received as a historian: the passion for primary sources, the methodological rigour, the narrative density. As a medievalist, I have always admired a solid North American tradition whose founding figures included Henry Adams, Joseph Strayer and Charles H. Haskins. It produced such inspirational successors as the German-American Ernst Kantorowicz, then later such challenging figures as Spiegel, Paul Freedman, Teofilo Ruiz, Nancy F. Partner or Carolyn W. Bynum – and, of course, in the field of medievalism, an institution as sound as the Medieval Academy of America, about to celebrate its centenary.

I would not, at this point in my academic and intellectual journey, organise such an assessment along the lines of national schools. I would most likely to do it from a more global perspective, in tune with the spirit and reality of our time. But approaching it retrospectively, reflecting on my own trajectory over these last four decades, it is obvious that the weight of those traditions has been significant. In any case, a large part of my historiographical hybridism is consistent with my never having liked sweeping historiographical dismissals. The richness of historiography lies in the variety of its pathways, which reflect the true complexity of the past we interpret and the present we experience. History is a house of many rooms, as historians have reflected with some of the images they have chosen for the titles of their works: ‘the varieties of history’ (Fritz Stern, Peter Burke) or ‘the houses of history’ (Anna Green and Kathleen Troup).

Historical (and historiographical) experience shows that what today seems definitive in the discipline might soon be regarded as spurious by the next generation. Articles by the likes of Stone (1979), Burke (1991) and Olábarri (1995) convinced me of how relative and ephemeral notions of the *new* and the *old* are in history. In this regard, I propose a healthy theoretical relativism, which has us value the best of the new and the old and helps us not to directly assign these categories to, respectively, the good and the bad.

I prefer the idea of the *trawl*, which makes us treasure the best of historiography, old or new, traditional or innovative, central or peripheral, beyond fashion, over and above ideological partisanship or political dissention.

This hybridism connects with my ambivalent stance towards postmodernism, considered generically. Many historians have come under fire from the most radical postmodern tendency to attack the very integrity of the past. Gordon Wood reacts against some postmodern scholars who ‘in their well-intentioned but often crude efforts to make the past immediately usable, undermine the integrity and the pastness of the past’ (2008, 8). Indeed, postmodernism is always rather paradoxical. Spiegel suggests that the contradiction of postmodernism is embedded in its very origins – that it goes back to the trauma engendered not only in those who suffered the Holocaust but also in their direct descendants. On the one hand, there was a desire to recover a lost past; on the other, the recognition that this was impossible in real terms (Spiegel 2007, 89–98). This intellectual paradox and frustration was, in turn, projected in the form of epistemological scepticism. But, beyond those bitter paradoxes, I think that, in the final analysis, postmodernism has contributed many more positive than negative things to history, and not only from a passive perspective – that alert historians to the necessarily mediating role of language that Spiegel spoke of (1997, xi–xii) – but also an active one, as it has enriched us in our research fields, methodological pathways, theoretical insights, new approaches and narrative effectiveness.

III

I have already mentioned that what interested me about history is the possibility of being a part of and apart from history at the same time. Perhaps this explains my interest in historians’ autobiographies, both medieval (Aurell 2012) and modern (Aurell and Davis 2009; Aurell 2015, 2017). Autobiography is a hybrid genre between history and literature, referentiality and imagination, necessarily blending the roles of the author, the narrator and the protagonist.

Georges Duby’s *History continues* (1991) – which I recommend to my PhD students at the beginning of their journey – opened my eyes to the fascinating world of the internal object-subject, actor-author conversation that ought to be constantly active in all of us as historians. I realized the theoretical wealth of a genre in which professionals in the study of the past confronted *their* past. It is not (or it should not be) a narcissistic operation but a profoundly intellectual and epistemological inquiry. The historian is like a juggler who maintains a fragile balance between the creative-constructive authorship of the artist and the explorer-discoverer mode of the scientist. Historians are never at rest in their position between the two extremes of the polarity personified by the poet and the physicist. But this increases the theoretical and epistemological interest of our discipline, so long as we know how to find the right formulas to

investigate it. The constant interrogation and dialogue between the historian-actor and the historian-author explains why autobiography by historians becomes a privileged field of disciplinary exploration. We come to understand better Taylor's suggestion that 'Every historian should, I think, write an autobiography' (1983, ix). Of course, we do not all have the talent to write one, though we should at least concern ourselves with reading some of them, for the realism they convey.

Duby's memoirs match the paradigm of 'interventional autobiography', one of the six historiographical-autobiographical styles that I defined in the book I wrote on this particular genre (*Theoretical Perspectives on Historians' Autobiographies*, 2015). Thanks to Jeremy Popkin's pioneering work (2005) and my own research, I unearthed some 470 historians' autobiographies. My original intention was to write for a readership of historians, even though, somewhat to my dismay, it turned out the book has been of more interest to literary critics, at least in its first round of reception. After the review she published on my book, Barbara Caine (2018) told me that she thought 'the book was really interesting and wide ranging in many ways, but perhaps a little too concerned to fit works into particular categories.' Afterwards, in a review of the book, Kalle Pihlainen suggested that,

Nevertheless, to reiterate his caveat concerning instability, these categories should not be read too literally. Obviously there are overlaps, continuities as well as contradictions to be found in such a taxonomy and Aurell rightly emphasizes, for example, the similarities between his monographic and interventional authors, the most literally ideological of these groupings. (Pihlainen 2019, 511)

That was interesting as Caine and Pihlainen hit the target, because, during the process of writing, I felt uncomfortable having to analyse historically a clearly literary corpus – the same concern I have when I approach medieval historiography – a clearly science/art tension. Caine's and Pihlainen's comments made me remember Kuhn's assertion that '(scientific) research is a strenuous and devoted attempt to force nature into the conceptual boxes supplied by professional education' (Kuhn 1970, 5) and Michel Foucault's concept of 'archaeology', in which he argued that categorization is a cultural act designed to include and exclude (Foucault 1989, 136). Whether we like it or not, historians must proceed in this way, because we have to bring order to the volumes of data we collect from the past.

This project on historians' autobiographies showed me that historians write their autobiographies in the same 'scientific' way that they write history. I eventually constructed six *boxes* or categories in which to classify historians' autobiographical styles: humanistic, biographical, ego-historical, monographic, postmodern and interventional. I can give one example of each of these:

First, Robin Collingwood's *An Autobiography* (1939) evinces the elegance of the humanistic autobiographical style that developed in the inter-war period. Some of the historians educated at English universities such as Cambridge or Oxford idealise their formative period, marked by interdisciplinarity and grounding in classical literature. Second, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr.'s *In Retrospect: The History of a Historian* (1963) exemplifies the measured narrative and object-subject exploration of the biographical autobiographical style favoured by the second generation of American historians influenced by the professionalization process. Third, Annie Kriegel's *Ce que j'ai cru comprendre* (1991) reflects the aspiration of ideologized postwar historians to produce the apparently oxymoron genre of *monographic* autobiography. They subject themselves to the processes of historical inquiry that they usually apply to their other historical projects. It is precisely this paradox of genre (something like ego-monographs) that lends them a charm and originality that belie the weight of their content. For readers able to overcome the daunting impression made by an 800-page volume and the initial tedium of her dense prose, Kriegel achieves the effect of a self-portrait of an *author* who is enthusiastic about her object of study (the origins of the French Communist Party) and an *actor* who is increasingly disenchanted with the Stalinist drift of that same PCF, which she had been instrumental in founding.

Fourth, Philippe Aries' *Un historien du dimanche* (1980) brings to book-length form the particular genre of *ego-histoire*, which had typically been practised in the form of *papers*, as promoted by Pierre Nora among the great French historians of the time, whom he asked to 'make explicit, historicizing one's own self, the connection between the history that one makes and the history that makes us' (Nora 1987, 7). It is a form of academic autobiography addressing the methodological and epistemological problems associated with the practice of history. Aries' autobiography also has the charm of being by a historian considered the *maverick* of the third generation of *Annales*, as suggested by the title itself, but one who enjoyed great prestige and authority thanks to his books on childhood and attitude towards death.

Fifth, Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986) is the typical example of postmodern autobiography that achieves an ironic approach to its own subject (her personality). It is a successful experiment in how an inquiry into oneself can become an actual treatise on a historical subject – in this case, the role of the working woman in industrial societies, and the function of social history in understanding the complex economic and social processes involved. Steedman's autobiography is considered by critics as both creative autobiography and genuine artefact of social history in itself.

Finally, Geoff Eley's *A Crooked Line* (2005) surveys the historiographical currents that have affected the West in the last fifty years, using his own

intellectual and historiographical itinerary as the connecting thread. It is an example of interventional autobiography – deploying the story of his own journey not only to understand but also to *intervene* in the current historiographical debate – and is full of ethical repercussions. It is rather analogous to what Clifford Geertz did in his *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (1995), where he uses the narration of his life to explore the essence of symbolic anthropology. In this same vein, Robert A. Rosenstone's *Adventures of a Postmodern Historian: Living and Writing the Past* (2016) demonstrates the maturity that the genre of historians' autobiography has acquired. It is a hybrid between sophisticated epistemological self-exploration and respectful appraisal of the historiographical tradition, which ends up yielding a convincing portrait of the (necessarily) complex activity of the historian. The maturity achieved by this peculiar genre of historians' autobiographies is also shown Jill K. Conway's *True North* (1994), which achieved public acclaim, following the classic canons of the genre without losing her insightfulness or historical sensibility. It is perhaps no coincidence that this captivating Australian historian, the first female president of Smith College (US), was a specialist precisely in autobiographical studies (Conway 1999).

Reading hundreds of autobiographies by my fellow historians and following the Platonic maxim – 'An unexamined life is not worth living' – has given me the opportunity to reflect on my own journey. There was a considerable amount of personal discovery in the project. This experience led me finally into that zone of convergence between the author and protagonist of the past that I have been searching for since my youth. Those readings have enabled me to distinguish three major points in my own career, corresponding to the three main subject areas that I have worked on: medieval Mediterranean merchant culture, medieval historiography and royal self-coronations. Each of them corresponds with the succession of different interests and approaches to historiography during the last half-century: socio-economical (privileged by the postwar Marxisms and structuralisms), cultural (favoured by the history of mentalities and the new cultural history from the 1970s) and symbolic (emerging from an interest in the mechanisms of power and history's dialogue with symbolic anthropology spread from the 1980s).

The first period occurred in my Barcelona years, which I described at the beginning of this essay. My work on the Mediterranean merchants (Aurell, 1996; Aurell and Puigarnau 1998) allowed me to encounter the social sciences, especially sociology and economics – and also to engage with cultural anthropology through the adoption of ideas from the history of mentalities. One critic defined my work on merchant culture as 'social history of mentalities', a formula that accurately picked up on my attempt to combine traditional social history, rather Anglo-Saxon and Marxist in

origin – and in which I had been trained in my undergraduate years – with the new French *Annales* history of the mentalities. I was on that journey ‘from the cellar to the attic’ and little by little learning about the cultural turn.

The merchant period ended rather abruptly in 1998, when I moved to the University of Navarra. I left my lightly Mediterranean Barcelona for the sombre Atlantic Pamplona, attracted by the deserved reputation of promoting interdisciplinary research of my new university. I hit the shot. I had to leave my daily contact with the Barcelona archives, but this move became a catalyst of all the theoretical and historiographical unease I was carrying within me. My first important decision was a shift in the thematic focus of my research, coinciding with a visit by Gabrielle Spiegel to my new university shortly after I moved to Pamplona. I knew the rich historical corpus written in Catalan during the Middle Ages, among them two autobiographies by kings, James I and Peter IV of Aragon, as well as other fascinating chronicles such as those of Ramon Muntaner and Bernat Desclot. Catalan scholars of the first half of the twentieth century had published very detailed articles on these medieval chronicles. But these were largely unavailable to many scholars, due to the complexity of their medieval Catalan, difficult even for a native speaker. Spiegel convinced me of how interesting it might be to make that material available to the international academic community, inspiring me with her approach that blended theory with practice.

Yet, the challenge of finding a new topic gave me a touch of vertigo. The start of a new subject entails the tracking down of new sources, a revision of methodology, negotiation with other disciplines and the exploration of new narratives. But the experience has shown me that these shifts promote an enriching – and not always straightforward – interdisciplinary dialogue. My time spent analysing medieval historiography (Aurell 2012), a hybrid genre between history and literature, led me into the field of literature and thus the discipline of literary criticism. This also made me share, on a practical level, the linguistic and literary experience of the historical discipline from the 1970s, in reaction to the dialogue with the social sciences of preceding decades.

Finally, the period of research on self-coronations and their ritual dimension during the 2010s (Aurell 2020) gave me access to the field of symbolic anthropology, developed from the 1980s by anthropologists as attuned to historical questions as Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner or Mary Douglas, to theology above all through its liturgical studies, and to political theology, as practiced by Carl Schmitt, Erik Peterson, Henri de Lubac, Percy E. Schramm, Ernst Kantorowicz and Giorgio Agamben.

All these interactions, transfers and disciplinary links required a specific ‘laboratory’. It is symptomatic that the most significant developments in the discipline (the cutting edge of innovation, as Stone defined it) should have come about through certain ‘communities’ rather than single individuals.

There are many examples throughout the history of historiography, such as the Cambridge school of political thought (Quentin Skinner, J. G. A. Pocock), the interdisciplinary history seminar at John Hopkins University (Jack Greene, Orest Ranum and Gabrielle M. Spiegel) and the Davis Seminar at Princeton, privileging the dialogue between history and symbolic anthropology (Lawrence Stone, Natalie Z. Davis, Robert Darnton, Clifford Geertz, Carl Schorske, Carl Richard Bruhl, John H Elliott, Giles Constable and Anthony Grafton) (Palmer 2001, 121–150).

That atmosphere of interdisciplinary dialogue is what I found at the University of Navarra, and what sustains me there. I remember the illuminating seminars organized with scholars of literature, led by Rocío G. Davis, in helping me properly frame my research on medieval and contemporary autobiography. Later, when I was engaged in my research on the self-coronations of medieval kings, I attended regularly the seminar ‘Religion and Civil Society’ at the university’s Institute for Culture and Society, directed by the political philosopher Montserrat Herrero. The seminar group has allowed us to explore in-depth a fully interdisciplinary methodology such as ‘political theology’ (Herrero, Aurell, and Miceli 2017), which in turn enables us to approach reality from a perspective that is both historical and systematic, as Schmitt suggested in his foundational statement of this area of research (2005, 36). This methodology was a very useful tool to examine the transferences between the political and the religion from Ancient Persia to Napoleon’s ceremonies of accession, as I tried to do in my *Medieval Self-Coronations*.

IV

After fighting against the current like a salmon during my university and post-graduate years, I finally felt comfortable with my project on medieval historiography and self-coronations. I did not feel like Quixote for once: instead, I found myself running with the historiographical flow. I did not need to fight dominant tendencies because I realized that the project drew interest from my colleagues in history, literary criticism, theology and symbolic anthropology. But this peaceful sensation did not last long. Being ‘comfortable’ is, unfortunately, not a very enduring feeling in scholarship, at least in historiography. Our usual feeling tends more toward anxiety than to serenity.

This change of mood proved favourable for my renewed interest in the concept of the *classic* in history. After finishing my project on historians’ autobiographies in 2015) – and following my own pattern of having commenced on a theoretical and a practical project at the same time – I decided to approach the question of the classic and the canon in historiography that had fascinated me from the beginning of my university years. If literature has its classics (Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes and so on), I wondered,

why doesn't history? What is a classic in historical writing? What are the conditions for the emergence and persistence of a classic in history? How do we explain the enduring interest in certain historical texts beyond the context in which they were written? Why are some of them systematically named by historians of historiography in their accounts? Why are they still read by historians not specifically interested in the development of historical writing? Why are they thought of as models of historical writing in classes? Why do non-historiographical audiences show an interest in them? How do post-colonial and gender studies factor in the configuration of a new canon and, eventually, in demolishing the old one?

This interest for the enduring condition of some historical works may have far-reaching roots. When I was a boy, I really enjoyed reading comics. But I was facing a problem. We were five brothers – later to be joined by a girl, Raquel, who adapted quite well to the boys' continuous rivalry and competitiveness – and, for better and for worse, I was the youngest. I remember battling with my older brothers to get hold of the *latest* comic to arrive, but I soon realized that it was a battle lost beforehand. At some point – with a pragmatism not in keeping with the mentality of a child and one that still surprises me – I resolved to wait for my brothers to get tired of the comics, so that I could have access to them without having to struggle. Then, I remember reading and rereading the same few comics until the arrival of a new consignment. There were only three or four – *El Capitán Trueno*, *Jabato Color*, *Mortadelo y Filemón* and *Asterix* – and I ended up knowing them by heart. This might also have been influenced by my inclination to go deeper into what I felt was worthy, above and beyond the *new*.

Either because of such childhood experiences or because of my passion for historiography, the fact is that I was attracted to the permanent rather than to the ephemeral in historical writing. I started reading some classics of history, as they were commented at class, such as Herodotus', Thucydides' and Polybius' war narratives, Plutarch's comparative biographies, Eusebius' ecclesiastic history and Constantine's biography, Augustine's *City of God*, Jean Froissart's chronicles, Francesco Guicciardini's *History of Florence*, Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Jules Michelet's *History of France*, Leopold von Ranke's *History of the Reformation*, Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, Fernand Braudel's *Mediterranean*, Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* and Natalie Z. Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre*, among many others.

I was attracted by those Thucydides' words: 'My work has been composed, not for the applause of today's hearing, but as a possession for all time' (*Histories* 1: 22, 4, in Edmunds 1975, 150). Nietzsche presented the same idea

in his typically provocative way: 'Only strong personalities can endure history; the weak are extinguished by it' (1957, 32). Who would not subscribe Thucydides' and Nietzsche's ambitious words? But, to my misfortune, I found myself again paddling upstream. Surrounded as we are by the exaltation of innovation over tradition, that move was a clear transgression – or, at least, a contradiction – of the shifting post-modern historiographical values. During the last decades, historians have been faced with a good number of *turns*, borne witness to the succession of many *new* histories and been experienced the emergence of many *de-* and *post-* tendencies. In the context of rapidly developing theories and the apparent instability of the epistemic panorama, historians have been compelled to seek labels that might define these new movements, which even include reiterative formulas such as 'new-new' histories or 'post-post' structuralisms and modernisms. In this sense at least, historians appear to be experiencing difficulties in locating or identifying 'enduring' history, within a shifting theoretical context and rapid generational transitions.

A related issue involves the 'Westernization' of the canon in historiography, 'accused by its critics of representing ethnocentric values which are antagonistic to diversity or of embodying absolute and ahistorical judgments which cannot be sustained' (Fleming 2007, 1). That is why I found so illuminating the postcolonial perspective given by Mukherjee (2014) in her exploration of the idea of the classic and the canon. Nevertheless, the problem remains, since I soon realized that I could not project the present context onto the past development of Western historiography. Assigning postcolonial and gender theories to the past without taking care of the proper context of each historical moment could damage the integrity of the past itself. I am still working on this.

In spite of such obvious difficulties and complexities, my rereading of the classic works of historiography, much like my rereading of those comics in my childhood, has made me see that the most enduring historical texts are those that have succeeded in balancing tradition and innovation, the historical and the practical past, archaeologism and presentism. This is the balance between the contemplative attitude of someone who approaches the past by gazing at a great work of art and the pragmatism of a professional analysing the portion of reality necessary to transform a situation in the present. My feeling was that we have much to learn from the classics that have attained this balance. T.S. Eliot acknowledged that he was encouraged to explore the concept of the classic in literature because he was concerned 'with the corrective to provincialism in literature' (1957, 69). Similarly, my concern is with the progressive provincialism of historiography, even if we are in the age of globalization and post-colonial studies.

I do not know where this project will lead me. But it would be sufficient reward if we could recover the sense of the classic in history. To add the

concept of the classic to the agenda of historiography will help us to gain a firm balance between the past and the present without confusing them, as I have argued in this article, since durable texts ‘possess intrinsic qualities that endure, but possess also an openness to accommodation which keeps them alive under endlessly varying dispositions,’ as Frank Kermode suggests (1983, 43–44). It will also improve the important – and ever increasing – function of ‘historical criticism’, since, as John M. Coetzee puts it, ‘the function of criticism is defined by the classic: criticism is that which is duty-bound to interrogate the classic’ (2001, 16). And, finally, it will allow us to better understand the permanent science/art condition and tension of history. As Peter Gay has suggested,

The dual nature of history – at once science and art – emerges even more strikingly in the related paradox that history is at the same time a progressive discipline and a timeless treasure house of classics. Nowadays the historian will not begin his studies of ancient Rome with Gibbon or Mommsen; they are no longer the last word. Yet *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and the *Römische Geschichte* are imperishable masterpieces which no amount of fresh facts or revisionist interpretations will eject from the pantheon. What makes them immortal is more than their sheer literary merit, great though that is. Their view of the past embodies truths that have been confirmed by other historians and have become a permanent cultural possession. These books, and others like them, are like exquisitely drawn if somewhat old-fashioned maps: delightful to consult, a model to later mapmakers, and still useful for showing others the way. (Gay 1974, 215–216)

When I think of the classics of history, I imagine that bass of the Beatles’ songs. For those who still appreciate that wonderful music, we know that the almost imperceptible but omnipresent bass is one of the keys which turns an ordinary song into a masterpiece – a classic. I was happy when I saw the same image used by Peter Burke applied to one classic of history: ‘Fortunately, a few voices remain audible, among them the deep bass of Braudel’ (Burke 2002, 141).

V

It is time to conclude. One of the ideas that has governed my scholarship is that my work as a theorist has not been dissociated from my research as a medievalist. I think that this reflects the spirit of a true ‘theory of history’: one which looks into the actual operation of history and therefore has a sufficient dose of realism to make a genuine contribution to improving historical practice, and hence the discipline itself. I do not exclude the possibility that someone from outside our discipline can decisively illuminate our own activity. No-one can doubt the benefits brought to our discipline by literary critics such as Eric Auerbach, Northrop Frye, Mikhail Bakhtin and Lionel Gossman; philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Reinhardt

Koselleck, Paul Ricoeur, Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes; historians of science such as Thomas Kuhn; or anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner. We should not, however, commit the error of *surrendering* that task of theorizing on our own field to other disciplines, just as no legal specialist would want that only other disciplines discuss the epistemology of law, a non-doctor the ethics of medicine, a non-philosopher the history of the philosophy, or a non-sociologist the methodology of sociology.

I admit that in the case of history we need special assistance from philosophy and, as has been rightly recommended in recent decades in emphasizing the narrative dimension of history, from literary criticism. But these disciplines must function as assistants in that task, rather than protagonists. I think the work that goes on in international associations like the International Network for Theory of History (INTH) or the numerous journals of historiography and theory of history – *Rethinking History* among them – set up in recent decades are key to this. I argue that history, which is governed by its narrative dimension, should better integrate three analogous groups: the theorists (who address the philosophical discussion of history), the critics (who deal more specifically with the rhetorical conditions of historical texts) and the historians of historiography.

The three activities are closely related, but each group has their own specific practices and roles. Theorists such as Frank Ankersmit, Alun Munslow, Keith Jenkins, François Hartog, Kalle Pihlainen or Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen have a background in philosophy and engage with important aspects of the historical operation, as they practice, in the end, intellectual history. Critics centre their inquiry on the rhetorical-formal aspects of the discipline and have contributed such essential themes as ‘narrative form in history’ (Leo Braudy), ‘style in history’ (Peter Gay, John Clive), the ‘rhetoric of historical representation’ (Jack Hexter, Ann Rigney), ‘film and history’ (Robert A. Rosenstone) and ‘poetics of history’ (Hayden White). These ‘critical historians of history’ – as Lionel Gossman once called such scholars – have opened the door to a better understanding of historical writing, particularly in its literary and narrative dimension. Finally, historians of historiography such as Arnaldo Momigliano, Peter Brown, Gabrielle M. Spiegel, Peter Burke, Anthony Grafton, John Burrow, Donald Kelley, Georg G. Iggers, Ernst Breisach or Peter Novick deal with the specific evolution of the discipline.

In the end, any reflection on history should be based on the data, ideas and interpretations of these three groups. I continue to learn from those whose work centres exclusively on theory or on practice, but I maintain that it is beneficial for the historical discipline that we all take an interest in both and, as far as possible, practise them too. This is something I emphasized already in the article I wrote for the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of

Rethinking History (Aurell 2018): the *Journal's* most substantial contribution to the historical discipline, and to historical knowledge, has been its effective interlocking of theoretical reflection and practical experimentation, accurately reflected in its subtitle (*The Journal of Theory and Practice*) and in the complementary personalities of its two founders, Alun Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone. My point is that, if historians do not achieve a productive balance between theory and practice, they are in danger of polarizing to the extreme of an archaeological history that is not relevant for its society, or else fall into a critical history conditioned by ideological, reductionist or manipulative presentism. It is that very middle ground that I would like to find, somewhere between David Lowenthal's *The Past as Foreign Country* (1985) and Frank Ankersmit's *Sublime Historical Experience* (2005). Having experienced in my research the radical difference between the attitude of the medieval chroniclers and postmodern historians – disposed to merge the present and past – and that of the modern – prone to mark a clear line between them – has made me more aware of the profound intellectual and social consequences that either stance entails. My point is that being open to practicing history and theorizing the practice of history makes us more realistic in our approaches to the past and in our theories about *how* to approach that past.

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