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Angels Writing on the Shoulders of Time?

Historia

History, it seems, is a young winged woman, robed in white; she writes while leaning on the shoulders of Time, who is an elderly man. She has one foot firmly planted on a stone, since history needs strong foundations. She looks back, for she works for posterity, enabling it to have a record of things past. She works speedily, hence the wings; she is disinterested – a sincere, pure witness of events, upon which she imposes order. This figure is ›la maistresse de la vie, la lumière de la mémoire, l'esprit des actions, & le soutien de la verité‹.²

These ideas were still current in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when such personifications enjoyed a resonance they were already beginning to lose by the era associated with Romanticism. Their frequent invocation in monumental works of architecture and art during the nineteenth century, and to a lesser extent the twentieth, in no way lessens the point that personifications have had their day. There is something deeply puzzling to modern and contemporary minds in the conceit that history is, if not exactly a woman, at least a feminine figure with an array of attributes that invokes notions, such as truth and sincerity, of which it is now easy to be dismissive.³

In this essay, I shall suggest that, if the question ›*historia magistra vitae*?‹ is to be taken seriously, we might re-engage with these traditions, and that we can do so in two complementary ways. In the first we might make familiar historical moves and examine the grip such ideas exercised in the past. Why was it so compelling to gather complicated ideas together and represent them in the form of a gendered body with elaborate attributes and accoutrements? In the second, to which I shall give more attention here, we can use these figures as devices with which to consider the role of history now.⁴

The presentation of *Historia* that I have just sketched in was part of a widespread practice, which involved presenting ideas as human figures and giving them an ac-

companying gloss or glosses. More specifically many fields of study and genres of writing were presented as female forms – Poetry, Tragedy, Comedy, Astronomy, Mathematics, for example, while other concepts, ›Understanding‹ and ›Study‹, for instance, were young men.⁵ The muses are closely related figures; Clio, »who presided over« history, was the first of them. Her »name signifies praise; she is represented young, with a flowing white robe, and is crowned with a garland of laurels... The laurel being an ever-green, denotes history perpetuating past events.«⁶ A small number of core ideas come up in relation to both History and Clio and they function associatively. I take these chains of association to be, at least in part, ways of gathering together a range of ideas and giving them simplified visual expression. It is striking that features such as wings and laurel wreaths were familiar from other contexts, hence through their use links were made between ›history‹ – an abstract idea – and other areas of human activity. Indeed the elements within each illustration, as in its accompanying text, act as tags, and they do so because they are *legible*.⁷ The vogue for this type of personification presupposes that writers, sculptors and painters deploy clearly recognisable ›figures‹ enjoying wide currency for audiences who will not just decode them, but absorb their messages.⁸

I use the term ›message‹ advisedly. In the iconologies, the messages were not, however, units of information but pulses of moral instruction. In such works, legibility and moralising were natural partners. When these qualities are yoked to the specific theme of history, the question of what can be learned from the process of writing history, from the past, that is from History, immediately follows. We think of the ubiquitous phrase ›lessons from history‹, which is, then, akin to ›*historia magistra vitae*‹.⁹ This essay uses personifications to think about the vexed, and conceptually complex, issues both these phrases raise.

There is more to said, however, about the ways in which these personifications work. The detail that is provided, not just about gender and attributes but also about age and disposition suggest that viewers and readers are being invited to identify with the figure in question.¹⁰ I mean ›identify with‹ in a rather particular sense here: not that audiences necessarily find themselves, rather that they see human qualities they already know about, qualities from everyday life, and that thereby what is abstract is humanised, expressed in familiar idioms. At the same time, these figures gather together and serve as a focal point for what might otherwise be unmanageable, disparate ideas, difficult to grasp. Arguably, ›history‹ is just such an idea; it is an abstraction composed of many different elements and much historiographical reflection continues to grapple with the conjunction in one word, ›history‹, of what seems ordinary and approachable with its formidably complex constituent ideas.¹¹ When historians write about what they do and why, when they comment on the discipline and its wider implications, such issues are there, whether acknowledged

or not. In *History in Practice* I have tried to find ways of thinking about them that remain connected to historical practice.¹² What historians do, while related to ›history‹, is a distinct phenomenon – an assembly of verbs rather than an abstract noun, we might say. While there is room for meta-discourse, I remain unsure how useful it is to either practising historians who (mostly) believe in the intellectual integrity and social value of their craft or to the many publics that consume history in its diverse forms. I should note that every time I use the word ›history‹, I am expecting the reader to make judgements about the meaning and the resonances it possesses at just that moment. However conceptually precise any given writer is, there is a richness, a fertile ambiguity at the very heart of ›history‹ that can never be removed. Since it is there, it must be embraced, and my way of doing so in the context of this essay is to use the personifications to play with.

We might say that *Historia*, the white-robed young woman, is a strategic fiction, who presents ›history‹ as a coherent unity, since a human body suggests just such an organised, integrated entity, and thereby gives the idea a fabricated, made wholeness it would not otherwise have. It makes the totality of ›history‹ easier to identify with, and one particular form that identification can take is the association between the practitioner of history and the *ideals* the figure literally embodies. Indeed, this, suitably generalised, might almost be a definition of ›personification‹. Furthermore, the female form lends history authority, and more specifically a three-fold classicised authority. These figures are visually speaking ›classical‹, with respect to their robes and poses, their manner of depiction and many of the accoutrements. They are directly associated with Greek myth, through, for example, the muses – the children of Jupiter and Memory. And in presenting them to later generations, classical authors – Herodotus, Pliny, Plutarch, for instance – were directly invoked. At the same time, many explanations invoke Christian notions and Biblical texts. The overall tenor of these works, then, is moralising.¹³

These personifications give fields of study such as history a kind of readily appreciable coherence, they invest them with authority, and they expound their value. By virtue of being intense and compressed, they act as a type of cultural currency. From the existence of such highly articulated associations with *Historia*, it follows that ›history‹ was a powerful concept, long, long before there were ›professional‹ historians, however the notion of a profession is defined. To be sure, the more work is done in the area, the more it is appreciated how complex historical practices were before the nineteenth-century, the period during which ›professionalisation‹ and institutionalisation are generally taken to have occurred.¹⁴ History exists in many registers, and has done so for centuries: the attributes associated with it form a particular legacy for subsequent generations. The moralising aura may embarrass us, but it needs to be taken seriously, precisely because the discourses of public history that are becoming

increasingly prominent, take it for granted that remembering the past, being actively engaged with it, has value for citizens.¹⁵

I have indicated that the iconologies contained ›messages‹ – a notion I would never normally use in relation to the practice of history. It conveys an uncomplicated sense of data-transmission and thereby denies the mediations that are necessarily present in acts of reading, looking and writing. By that token, it implies that whatever values are involved are correspondingly straightforward. One paradigm might be the health warning on cigarette packets: information about the effects of smoking is provided and is integrally bound up with the idea that smoking is bad and irresponsible. The information and the moral aura are welded together. If there are messages associated with history, if we posit links between historical practice and moral instruction, they must be, according to the position that I, like many working historians, adopt, of an altogether different kind. The result is multiple disjunctions: between public history now and historians' sense of their field; between earlier images of ›history‹ and intellectual interpretations of the concept now. When the past is put on display, the language of messages is generally present, whereas relatively few historians couch their writings in such terms. The rather secure invocation of ›history‹ as ›a narrative of facts delivered with dignity‹, of ›truth‹, ›sincerity‹ and ›objectivity‹ seems not just outmoded but hopelessly naïve.¹⁶

While I shall certainly not argue that these epistemological claims should be reinstated, I shall propose that there is inspiration to be gained from ›moral emblems‹, from ›*historia*‹, her sisters and brothers. Let me take three themes – wings, writing, witnessing – and use them to muse briefly about the practice of history before turning to the term ›*magistra*‹.

The figure of history resembles an angel, we are told, because of the wings, which show that she will proclaim everywhere various events with incredible speed.¹⁷ History is a concept; historians are required for it to be a living practice. *Historia* herself is writing, which might be taken as an invitation for historians to identify directly with her. But the image jars – angels proclaiming with dispatch is probably not an apt evocation of the historical profession now. Angels mediate between the divine and human orders. What they proclaim originates from a higher power: they are communicators, it is true, and they are guardians, overseers in a double sense; they take care of mortals and they possess a wide vantage point. Wings express these ideas metonymically – movement, protection and carrying messages. The very idea of an angel has retained its poetry in secular contexts; it has the capacity to evoke not just benignity but also loving care. It is arguable that good historians have an exceptional overview, that their capacity to express it accessibly is not exactly a proclamation, but an important, and deservedly privileged form of communication.¹⁸ No, history does not convey ›messages‹, but at its best it stimulates thought, reflection, and un-

derstanding in both those who read and those who write it. I value the centrality of writing in the image of *Historia*, it is the centrepiece of the historian's craft and perhaps the prime vehicle through which critical reflection on the past occurs. One problem, then, with popular concepts of 'lessons from history' is that they regard the 'facts' as providing the lessons rather than these being produced, if they are produced at all, through processes of interpretation. *Historia*, of course, records, she does not interpret, but I want to find some way of retaining, for the practice of history now, something of her quasi-angelic role. Historians, it hardly needs to be emphasised, do not in any way stand *above* others, but, and it is an extremely important proviso, the entire rationale of the discipline rests in its capacity to have a special kind of vantage point, to integrate apparently disparate materials into a coherent narrative. And it is not any old narrative, it is one that has engaged, thoughtfully, sincerely and judiciously with actual events and processes and seeks to render them intelligible to readers.¹⁹

Writing is indeed the key process. In the iconological mentality, this is in order to provide a record of events that are simply to be transcribed. In contemporary practice, writing has a rather different, and distinctly precarious status. Mere recording of what has occurred hardly counts as history. Yet, the concept 'research' does give value to finding things out and noting them down. In the digital age, considerable priority is being given to putting *public* records, such as those owned by the state and relating to its citizens and to government broadly defined, into the *public* domain, that is to say, accessible to all.²⁰ If there are targets attached to historical research, as there certainly are in Britain through the Research Assessment Exercises and the conditions attached to funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, then the recording aspects of history writing are likely to come to the fore. History as composed of acts of recording is a theme worth staying with for a moment. It allows historians to see themselves as the heirs not just of chroniclers, which is a familiar idea, but also of epic poets, coroners, journalists, diarists, treasurers and those clerks who kept records, of, for instance, births, marriages and deaths. I am not suggesting that the keeping of records is devoid of complexity. Rather I am drawing attention to, on the one hand, the range of record-keeping groups that historians might care to imagine themselves in relation to, and on the other, the role of interpretation, for which demography might stand as a provocative example. We note that keeping records of life events is far from straightforward; it refers to a wide array of practices that need to be understood for the results to be usable in historical work. Demographers not only do just that, but they also develop sophisticated ways of incorporating the understanding of those practices into their interpretative frameworks, which are always, in the end, verbal, rather than numerical, constructions.²¹ Thus, the roles of record-keeping, historical recording, and historical interpretation are considerably

more entwined than some like to think, and their mode of entwinement is itself an object worthy of historical analysis.

Writing is, it may be agreed, a process of both interpretation and recording, although much recent commentary treats historical writing as, if I may put it this way, *just* writing. Appreciating the role and status of writing in historical practice is of the utmost importance for current historiographical controversies. Furthermore, the recent growth of popular interest in history has coincided, and not accidentally, with a marked revival in historical fiction. ›Interpretation‹ may be used as the concept that places in the foreground the mental processes of assessing evidence, making judgements and crafting a written account that novelists, like academic historians undertake. History-writing as interpretation might be seen as permissive, sanctioning open-ended, unconventional and personalised styles. But it might equally be deemed to place enhanced responsibilities on historical shoulders, to demand additional skills and hence to be the very opposite of permissive.

There is no doubt that historians, defined as broadly as anyone pleases, have become more experimental in the ways that they write.²² I guess this is all to the good in that it demands that readers reflect on the relationships between historical knowledge and its embodiment in a text. One conclusion might be that there needs to be a relaxation and expansion in the forms and genres that historians employ. Perhaps. But before adopting an ›anything goes‹ stance, three issues need to be considered which bear on the ways in which historians communicate with wider worlds. Despite the increasing significance of film, television, museums, galleries and other displays, the primary means by which historical findings are disseminated remains the written word. Considering these issues should help clarify some of the challenges implicit in talk of lessons from history. The first is what is now couched in terms of ›access‹, but which I would prefer to think about in terms of audiences. ›*Historia*‹ enjoys a certain status because she records important events for posterity. I take ›posterity‹ to imply broad audiences. Historical writings may indeed have necessarily restricted audiences when they demand considerable detailed knowledge, specialised skills, or exceptionally complex theoretical frameworks. In such instances, a case can be made for writing in particular ways. If, however, writing is taken to be at the centre of historical practice, then the ability to present accounts of the past in an accessible and engaging manner is to be valued exceptionally highly – a point which might be taken to encourage experiment but to discourage unclear, arcane, trite and sloppy writing. After all, every single historical point can be expressed in many different ways according to the audience, but all may be beautifully turned, conceptually precise, and accurate.

The second issue is ›transparency‹ if I may invoke another term from contemporary public discourse. It is a fundamental part of the tacit contract that scholars have with each other and with the public that sources are acknowledged and revealed.²³

The whole process of historical research and reasoning needs to be as transparent as possible. While this may be achieved in a variety of ways, I can see no possible defence for concealment or evasion, even in popular works. Indeed one might argue that it is part of the historian's responsibility to raise general awareness of the intricate role of sources in historical argument and judgement. In fact this might be deemed a particularly high priority when historians write for non-specialist readers. One highly desirable result would be a more widespread understanding of just how problematic the very notion of ›lessons from history‹ must be.

The third issue is the way in which, since rhetoric is constitutive of all writing, effects are produced in readers that may properly be called emotional. This is not bad, it is just the case. And, since it is the case, both historians and their readers need to treat the whole issue with the care and respect it deserves. It is always easiest to illustrate the point by referring to the ubiquity of the heroes and villains mode, which brings us neatly back to the figure of ›*Historia*‹, who records great deeds and invites readers to draw (moral) conclusions from her accounts.²⁴ It is not just that writing produces emotional effects, it is that some historical positions are more or less unthinkable, that is to say, difficult to put into print. Hence the intense controversies surrounding the interpretation of acts of violence, and above all those that are now understood in terms of genocide. There is rarely consensus on such painful and challenging subjects, which simply reinforces the point that emotions run high on these matters, and that they are sustained in part by the events or people themselves but above all by the languages through which they have been represented.²⁵

›*Historia*‹ is in addition a ›witness‹, a position of special epistemological privilege. Witnesses not only see for themselves, they then bear testimony to what they observed to others, frequently in an official setting such as a tribunal or law court. In some contexts, there is a further role for witnesses, which is to proclaim as widely as possible what they have themselves seen, precisely because it contains a message of some kind or another. This all fits rather neatly with the lessons from history mentality. But what qualifies a historian to be a witness, since they are rarely present at the events they study? Perhaps they are witnesses-by-proxy by virtue of their close involvement with primary sources. Perhaps they are expert witnesses, who possess specialised skills not just in working with original materials but in interpreting them, extrapolating from them and in producing an account that takes as much evidence on board as possible. These readings of how historians may be witnesses owes more to the law than to religion, the other main source of our ideas on the subject. The development of oral history, and of the use of interviews by historians more generally, possibly comes closer to the religious senses.²⁶

To speak at length and in a specially-designed manner with historical actors is, I think, a kind of witnessing, one that is of considerable importance for the practice of

history. It goes without saying that what the interviewer is witnessing is less events and experiences themselves than the interviewee's living re-presentation of them. I have absolutely no doubt both that there is a special privilege that such work bestows upon historians, and that it raises formidably complex challenges that are exemplary of the nature of historical practice in general. The growth of oral history is an important phenomenon; so too is the related but distinct matter of the ›witness seminar‹. However carefully such events are managed, they cannot produce systematic historical evidence. This is not just because of the well-known point that the faculty of memory works in mysterious ways. It is because what people say in such a setting, where there are other witnesses and an audience present, is shaped by so many forces, many of them fierce emotional, moral and political drives, that what emerges is, if placed in the category ›evidence‹, distinctly problematic. As a result historians take account of these factors, as they always do, assessing the peculiar circumstances out of which their materials arise. The value, then, of noting that ›*Historia*‹ is a witness, is the opportunity it provides to reflect on the types of witnessing, generally in a highly mediated form, that historians undertake.

So far I have been exploring ideas about history and historians that have been prompted by past personifications of such ideas. The notion that history may be considered the ›*magistra*‹ of life is closely tied to claims about ›lessons from history‹ that need to be subjected to critical scrutiny. This may be accomplished by pressing on what ›history‹ is, but it is just as crucial to reflect upon a cluster of ideas – education, teaching, instruction and lessons – that express the transfers between the past, those who study it and wider worlds.

Magistra

Is history then a schoolmistress, one possible interpretation of ›*magistra*‹? The word must be feminine, since *historia* is. Other possible translations include ›mistress‹ and ›leader‹. What might the invocation of a schoolmistress figure imply about the nature of history and what other connotations would the male form, *magister*, have? *Magister* can be a master, a word with a wide range of meanings, as well as ›head‹ and ›superintendent‹. Most important, what kinds of learning, and hence what types of social relationships and processes, is implied by the term? ›History teaches...‹ is an endlessly repeated phrase, but it begs the questions, what does it teach, how and through whose agency, and who says it does that? It is worth remarking that equivalent phrases are not endlessly invoked in the same way about other fields. I have never heard anyone say, ›geography teaches...‹ or ›linguistics teaches...‹, although there are plausible claims to be made for both these subjects. I infer that there must

be something special about the claims that history teaches, and so perhaps about the ways in which it instructs those who study it.

›Schoolmistress‹ has pejorative connotations of bossiness, control, talking down, while schoolmaster allows a more scholarly, even donnish image. This distinction begins to indicate not just the gendering of learning but different types of social relationships and of education itself. Learning can indeed occur through a variety of processes: by rote and repetition, by example – watching exemplary people, through conversation and dialogue, by reading and thinking alone, through lectures given to many at once, seminars involving small numbers and more intimate tutorials, by first hand experience. Even in a short list, it is striking what diverse settings, human relationships and mental actions are involved. If there is to be any mileage in the idea of learning from history, it is essential that there is careful reflection upon the precise mechanisms involved. ›Mechanisms‹ may sound rather reductive, but they are inseparable from people, institutions, media, and value systems.

With these points in mind, the iconologies are worth another look. Many contain ›Education‹, a golden-robed matron, accompanied by a child she is teaching to read. She is holding, or placed next to, a young tree: ›which signifies that education causes the mind to retain even in old age, the bent or inclination in youth‹. She also ›holds a rod ... because, discipline is necessary in the cultivation of the mind.‹ Physical processes, involving channelling organic growth and chastisement of the body, are used to suggest the abstract idea, ›education‹. Reference is also made to the divine grace necessary for education, which is »the foundation that stirs up the mind to embrace virtue, and to fly from vice.«²⁷ Many different types of growth are invoked, arguably resulting from a mixture of types of instruction that we now consider quite separate – physical punishment and training trees, for example. The twin emphasis on getting them young and moral discipline is also striking. The iconologies contain cognate ideas, such as understanding (a young man), study (also a young man), knowledge (another woman clad in gold) and truth (a beautiful, young, naked virgin). When ›Instruction‹ is included, he is a venerable old man, holding a mirror and thereby suggesting the importance of self-knowledge. Then there is Learning, ›a mature lady ... her Arms open as if she would embrace another‹, where the emphasis is on long study, communication, and the domination of ignorance.²⁸ Open embrace and physical discipline are dramatically different ways of imagining the acquisition of knowledge. If we substitute mental discipline for physical, then all the ideas I have just outlined are useful devices for thinking through how one might practise and learn from history. Self-knowledge, openness, training, and ideals are indispensable aspects of the idea that knowledge of the past has the power to change people.

That such change can occur is undeniable and the analogy with child-rearing is a thought provoking one. Individuals learn, if to varying degrees from their own pasts

and from those close to them. This is not exactly ›history‹, which generally relates to processes and events of which we have little or no direct experience. Oral testimony passed down through generations would, I think, be the nearest it is possible to get to learning from a personal past and from history simultaneously. Most learning from history takes place through teaching and reading, as well as observing, whether in museums, the cinema or in the outside world from, say, buildings or battle sites. Yet for history to teach rather than entertain more is needed. We might think of this in terms of precepts. I use that term as shorthand to draw attention to some complexities implicit within the very idea of learning from history. A precept is brief, clear, a maxim or exhortation. If it is a rule for action or conduct, as dictionaries suggest, then it contains a moral component. More likely it contains a whole mass of judgements and assumptions that are rarely made explicit. Yet the possibility of deriving *precepts* from the past seems implausible, given the complexities of any given situation, the difficulty of isolating clear causes and effects, and then translating such analysis into the form of a maxim. There simply do not seem to be mechanisms that would enable all this to occur. It follows for me that if ›history teaches...‹ it must do so in some other form.

In thinking about the other forms, it is necessary to confront a further difficulty implicit in assumptions that we learn from the past. It is relatively easy to imagine how individuals might do so. We can examine ourselves and others of whom we have direct experience and assess the ways in which they learn, if learn they do, from both personal and more distant pasts. Claims about the value of history invariably contain more ambition, however. The implication is that *collectivities*, polities, even the human race as a whole can mobilise the transformative powers of history. Here the personifications are not helpful: the figures of an adult and a child may suggest types, but they give no clues about the ways in which groups might not only acquire shared learning but, yet more crucial, how they might turn it to good account. There are four distinct steps here – the development of insights into the past that have some sort of wider value, their transmission to individuals, the formation of a group understanding and finally the translation into public action that effects some sort of change.

Understanding how those steps might be accomplished would seem to be an important priority for those who make claims about learning from the past. Indeed it is worth considering rather carefully the desirability of polities operating in such a manner. With this thought, it is necessary to return to the issue of the forms through which historical lessons might be transmitted to groups, and to consider the role of the mass media. Here three related difficulties must be confronted. The first concerns the quality of the ›information‹ and the nature of the assumptions behind it. Who guards the gates and writes the lesson books? Could such groups exist that would act in the interests of all? The second concerns the difficulty of achieving any kind of consensus, both among the makers of history and among its audiences. Without some

measure of agreement, translating ›history‹ into public action is likely to prove difficult and politically contentious. The third concerns the art of persuasion. Historians are familiar with the role of propaganda, much of which contains historical claims of uncertain quality. Current debates about migration, about possible changes of policy and about how previous patterns of migration might be informative, illustrate these points beautifully. In this instance, history cannot be imagined as a human figure warmly transmitting insights to the young. Instead, *it* (not ›she‹) is a jumble out of which many accounts can be drawn; historians, politicians and interest groups fight, as at a jumble sale, over which pieces are to be used and how.

Yet there are aspects of the personifications that are still worth thinking with – the open embrace, the drive to communicate, the espousal of ideals, and even the notion of discipline itself, which underpins all scholarship. There is a further aspect of *magistra* that is worth considering. Master and Mistress are closely allied with the notion of mastery. Mastery is a far from straightforward idea, but it may be useful in this context. Perhaps mastery is what teachers possess and impart to their pupils. In a craft context, masters have proved themselves, produced a ›masterpiece‹ and transmit their skills to apprentices. This implies that mastery can only be achieved through toil and application, and that something fine and beautifully wrought is its ultimate manifestation. Mastery implies work, technique, highly developed skills. Is then *historia* the teacher who implants all this in ›life‹? I want to stretch the idea of a *magistra* a little more. The tree is trained in a particular way when young and retains it thereafter, demonstrating its trainer's mastery. Its form holds, manifests its ›education‹. So it is with human beings. What role then does the *magistra* play? She is surely still present through her imprint that endures, she remains, perhaps a kind of guiding hand, perhaps a presiding force. *Historia magistra vitae?* might then be translated as ›how does history preside over our lives?‹

Vitae?

While the iconologies contain entries for long life and short life, they cannot help directly with ›life‹, another formidably complex abstract idea, or with the puzzle already mentioned about how the bridging between individual and collective lives might be accomplished. *That* history presides over individual and collective lives seems banal and self-evident. Precisely *how* it does so is less clear. ›Life‹ is terribly unspecific – when we use a phrase such as ›that's life‹, it seems to encompass the experience of the whole human race. The idea of history presiding over life suggests a similar generality. One of the ways in which humanity is moulded by the past is through the effects of the physical environment, both manmade and natural. I would argue that

historians need to keep examining and thinking about the processes involved and specifically about the forms of historical awareness they generate. For, if history is to be invoked as a force for change, we need an elaborate understanding of how it seeps inside people as well as how it may be taken on board by significant swathes of the population in a more explicit manner.

History is, in diverse ways, a presiding presence in the physical environment. The recent waves of interest in landscape, heritage, and memorials show a fresh concern for aspects of the environment that come in and out of focus as intimations of the past. We might say that the material settings – from family photographs and interior decor to architecture and town planning – of most people's lives impart some sort of historical awareness to them. But this awareness is not an integrated or seamless whole; it is composed of fragments. Here we run across once again the problem of what lessons from history might look like. They are unlikely to come in the form of precepts, I have argued. Rather, if they exist at all, they will involve something more like understanding. And for them to be effective they have to exist beyond specialist communities – they need to be communicated to the general public, whose historical awareness is likely to be somewhat fragmentary. Giving a coherent account of that awareness and drawing out its implications are considerable challenges. It is not just that ›history‹ is so elusive, it is also that the awareness in question is equally hard to track. History shapes us, it weighs us down, it is a form of baggage as well as being a source of hope and inspiration. These are general claims, however, whereas ›lessons‹ implies more specificity. Hence the importance of detailed case studies capable of demonstrating how history has been and is being used to shape decision-making and value systems.

There is an alternative – the idea that *historia* stands *both* for knowledge and understanding of past *and* for the critical skills to evaluate how the past is studied, written about and used. This formulation does not solve the problem of how such critical skills might be imparted and then how the whole package could be used to inform decision-making. But it does specify more closely where the public value of history resides, and it turns away from the reductiveness of ›lessons‹ and towards the notion that ›history‹ is a shorthand for a highly distinctive meditative zone. Only in this spirit can we affirm that *historia magistra vitae est*.

Postscriptum

It would have been possible to construe this assignment as an autobiographical one. What have I learned from being a historian? I have chosen not to go down that path. This is partly because the question we were posed is a pressing one above all for collectivities rather than individuals. However, in closing it may be appropriate to

state quite directly the position I hold myself. If, as I have already suggested, *Historia Magistra Vitae?* might be loosely translated as ›How does history preside over our lives?‹, the answer must be – in every imaginable way from unshaped historical consciousness to direction causation. I tried to tackle this issue in chapter 6 of *History in Practice* by exploring not just public history – the context in which arguments about learning from history are most often made – but how the past moves in and out of focus, and how it is made usable. Elsewhere in the book I was rather dismissive of the whole ›lessons from history‹ mentality. I like it no better now, but as it has become increasingly pervasive I am convinced that historians need to take it seriously. The case against the idea can be broken down into some basic arguments. Situations are not easily compared with one another, hence whatever ›lessons‹ may be discerned in one are not readily transferable to another. The number of variables in any given historical case is so great that it seems implausible to isolate a very small number, in order to turn them into explanations that have more general application. The mechanisms of learning from the past remain unclear. It is certainly not directly from a special cadre – historians, who have little power, and few direct lines into policy making. Learning lessons from history requires acknowledged leaders who fulfil three conditions: they possess the knowledge and understanding, they are able to pass it on and then to alter the relevant policies, political decisions and prevailing attitudes. Without tangible effects, the lessons would hardly count for much. The evidence for lessons having been learned is changed behaviour.

I can nonetheless see ways in which the bundle of ideas and claims associated with lessons from history can be used constructively. It implies the persuasiveness of a certain type of comparative history, as, for instance, when AIDS is compared with the plague and questions are asked about responses to epidemics in different times. I am a devotee not just of comparative history but of the idea that historical reasoning is fundamentally comparative, even when it addresses the past of a single nation. Accordingly it is much easier to get a sharp sense of state formation in early modern Britain when sophisticated comparisons with so-called absolutist regimes are made – an obviously plausible comparison because it involves contemporaneous situations. But by extension it is possible to argue that through comparisons between, say, economies, types of welfare provision, the extent of the suffrage in two separate periods, the key differences can be identified, and something learned. Whether this could and should inform public policy is more debatable. Lessons from history might also be used as it were negatively, to counter universalising assertions about human nature, the thoughtless extrapolation back of our own values, and relegation of the past as primitive, other. I call this ›negative‹ because it enjoins us *not* to make assumptions. The history of the family is a particularly good example, since it has demonstrated how facile many claims are about matters such as infanticide, parental feelings to-

wards children and gender roles. There is a more positive way of presenting the point. For many centuries, the past has been treated as a fund of ideas and examples for later societies to think with. It is not just inevitable, it may be positively desirable to think of history as a distinctive type of bank account that individuals and groups draw on as needed. Past figures have often been taken as exemplifying standards, as markers on some kind of scale next to which those who come after may be judged and judge themselves. Perhaps ›lessons‹ is too structured a concept for these processes, nonetheless through them history does preside over life.²⁹ Perhaps the idea of honouring the dead, whether at national, international or familial levels, also contains something useful. It might be seen as a trigger for historical contemplation, which, again, is more inchoate and meditative than the term ›lessons‹ normally implies. All these ways of imagining learning from the past have something in common – they are prompts for thought and reflection rather than generators of slick, easy, immediate precepts.

If there is anything to the arguments I have made, then it is necessary to explain why talk of lessons from history retains its appeal and is so ubiquitous. Perhaps it is a way of exercising authority or rather fantasising about the potential of history to have wide effects. Certainly it expresses hope; it contains an embryonic utopianism that future improvement may arise from historical understanding. It gives shape to vaguely felt moral imperatives, that collectivities should, like individuals, be capable of learning and of being ›better‹.

I am still resisting autobiography. I have learned much from being a historian and from other historians, but I cannot find anything generalisable or beyond the anecdotal in that statement. Besides, historians are people and hence the idea that they are teachers is totally plausible; history is an abstract idea and hence the types of intellectual and moral agency it possesses is altogether more problematic. There is another possible explanation for all the talk of lessons from history – it is a defensive, self-justifying way of claiming that history matters. There is in my mind no doubt that it does, but the case for history is made not in vague assertions about its value, but through the quality of its scholarship and by its careful, responsible transmission in as wide a variety of forms and media as possible. For this reason, public history lies, or rather should lie, at the heart of the discipline and not be a field set apart of special interest to a subset of the profession. It is precisely because there is so much loose talk about the past and about the value of history, that historians have what is both a privilege and a burden – to be judicious, scrupulous, clear, accessible, engaged with public life. I may find the notion of ›lessons from history‹ facile and annoying, but I find the winged figure of *Historia* writing on the shoulders of Time, communicating the past to the future, not just poetic, but inspiring.

I have used ›*historia magistra vitae*?‹ as a way of reflecting on the theme of lessons from history, yet for me the two phrases have quite distinct connotations. One I find

closed and limited, eliciting an unthinking consent. The other by contrast invites consideration of questions that arise for all historians, even if they cannot easily be formulated. The personifications help us to reflect upon and articulate such questions, but not by presenting formulae or pre-packaged answers, rather by research and meditation, and by writing, during which meditation also occurs. There is a constant need for devices that stimulate reflection on the nature of historical scholarship, on how historians identify both with the past in general and with their specific objects of study, on public history, and on the place of ideals and moral judgements in historical writing. It seems that the long traditions of personifying complex ideas still have value, yet one more respect in which *historia* is a presiding force.

Notes

- 1 I offer my warmest thanks to Mikuláš Teich, whom I have long admired, for his kindness in inviting me to contribute to this collection. Here I remember our mutual friend Roy Porter, whose devotion to *Historia* remains an inspiration. My heartfelt gratitude goes to those historians who have been in my mind as I wrote the essay, and from whose encouragement and loving care I have benefited. I might say that, irrespective of gender, they have been my muses.
- 2 Cesar Ripa, *Iconologie, ou Explication Nouvelle de Plusieurs Images, Emblèmes... Moralisées* par I. Baudoin, Paris 1643, 88; in the quotation, I have added some accents but not changed any spellings.
- 3 Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, Rome 1603 and London 1709, 38, Figure 151.
- 4 Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*, London 1985, and Ludmilla Jordanova, *Nature Displayed. Gender, Science and Medicine 1760-1820*, Harlow 1999, chapter 2.
- 5 G. Richardson, *Iconology*, London 1779, 2 volumes – this is another version of Ripa: vol 1, 62 (Poetry and Tragedy); 63 (Comedy); 64 (Astronomy); 71 (Mathematics); 57 (Understanding); 79 (Study).
- 6 *Ibid.*, vol 1, 43.
- 7 On the theme of legibility see, for example, Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime*, Cambridge 1981; see also the journal *Word and Image*.
- 8 The title of Baudoin's book is instructive, it claims it is an »Œuvre Augmentée d'une seconde partie, necessaire à toute sorte d'esprits et particulièrement à ceux qui aspirent, à estre, ou qui sont en effet orateurs, poètes, sculpteurs, peintres, ingénieurs«. On the vogue for emblems see John Manning, *The Emblem*, London 2002 and Michael Bath, John Manning and Alan R. Young, eds., *The Art of the Emblem*, New York 1993. Note that ›figure‹ refers not just to the human bodies, but also to language, as in the phrase ›figure of speech‹.
- 9 Cf. Ernest May, »Lessons« of the Past. *The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*, New York 1973, and Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History*, Oxford 1991.
- 10 The age of the figure is usually specified. To illustrate the point about disposition, I quote from the description of ›Study‹ in Richardson, *Iconology*, as note 5: »it is ... allegorically represented by the figure of a young man, sitting in a studious attitude, modestly dressed, and of a pale complexion... He is painted of a pale complexion, as too close an application enfeebles the body«, vol. 1, 79-80.
- 11 The growth of interest in historiography in recent years has been dramatic and resulted in a huge secondary literature. Some sense of this can be gleaned from the journals *History and Theory* and the more recently established *Rethinking History*. Yet sophisticated debates about the practice of history are not new, see for example, James Shotwell, ›History‹ in: *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th edition, New York 1910, volume XIII, 527-533.
- 12 Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, London 2000, a second edition is in press.
- 13 For example, Richardson, *Iconology*, as note 5, vol. 1, 43 (where Herodotus, Virgil, and Ovid are cited), 82 (which invokes St. Paul), 95 (Pliny), 94 (Plutarch), 100 (Psalm CXXXIII).

- 14 Mark Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820*, Cambridge 2000; Daniel Woolf, *The Social Circulation of the Past: English Historical Culture 1500-1730*, Oxford 2003; John Kenyon, *The History Men: The Historical Professions in England since the Renaissance*, London 1993, 2nd edition.
- 15 Jordanova, *History*, as note 12, ch. 6; Jill Liddington, *What is Public History? Publics and their Pasts, Meanings and Practices*, in: *Oral History*, Spring 2002, 83-93, and the journal *The Public Historian*.
- 16 Richardson, *Iconology*, as note 5, vol. 1, 61.
- 17 I have paraphrased Baudoin, *Iconologie*, as note 2, 88: »L'Histoire ... est peinte avecque des aisles, pour monstrer qu'elle va publiant de toutes parts les divers evenemens, avec une incroyable vitesse.«
- 18 Christopher A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914*, Oxford 2004, is an outstanding recent example of an »exceptional overview«.
- 19 One of the most thoughtful accounts of the relationship between postmodernism and history may be found in Ernest Breisach, *On the Future of History. The Postmodernist Challenge and its Aftermath*, Chicago and London 2003, which is eloquent on many of the points I make here. His closing words are: »This record of the human experience over the millennia, always incompletely understood but cumulatively becoming clearer, has been the responsibility of historians to keep and make known and will be so in postmodernity and beyond.« (208). See 199-200 on lessons from history. I thank David Reynolds for drawing my attention to this work.
- 20 In England, the Public Record Office, now The National Archives, is pursuing just such a policy, see their website: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/.
- 21 See, for example, the work of Richard Smith: Richard Smith, ed., *Land, Kinship and Life Cycle*, Cambridge 1984 and Idem, *Charity, self-interest and welfare: reflections from demographic and family history*, in: Martin Daunton, ed., *Self-interest and Welfare in the English Past*, London 1996, 23-49.
- 22 Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties: (Unwarrented Speculations)*, London 1992, is a well known example.
- 23 The fact that organisations of historians, such as the *Royal Historical Society* (in the UK) and the *American Historical Association* (in the USA) have formulated statements on ethics and professional conduct indicates the significance of these issues.
- 24 *Heroes and Villains: Scarfe at the National Portrait Gallery*, London 2003, is a stimulating revisiting of the mode.
- 25 Walter Sellar and Robert Yeatman, *1066 and All That. A Memorable History of England*, London 1930, provide a humorous commentary on such matters; the controversies and legal action surrounding David Irving's approaches to the Holocaust are no laughing matters, see for example, Richard Evans, *Telling Lies About Hitler. The Holocaust, History and the David Irving Trial*, London and New York 2002.
- 26 A classic text is Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past. Oral History*, Oxford 2000, 3rd edition; see also the journal *Oral History*.
- 27 Richardson, *Iconology*, as note 5, vol. 1, 82
- 28 *Ibid.* vol 1, 57 (Understanding); 79 (Study), vol. 2, 93 (Knowledge), 94 (Truth). For Instruction see the 1709 English edition of Ripa, 4, and 13 (Knowledge), 26 (Learning and Education), 73 (Study) and 78 (Truth). There are important distinctions to be made between learning, instruction, study, understanding and knowledge. For example, learning is a state of being while instruction and study are presented as processes. Instruction is used to promote the value of self-knowledge, while only education is presented as a *social* relationship. Historians are concerned with all these ideas, and perhaps also with wisdom, no longer a fashionable term but arguably the one that best expresses the depth of experience and understanding that learning from the past demands.
- 29 I would argue that in a number of respects portraiture practices do just this, see, for example, Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-century England*, New Haven and London 1993 and Ludmilla Jordanova, *Defining Features: Medical and Scientific Portraits 1660-2000*, London 2000.