Blowing Bubbles in the Postmodern Era

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For Margaret Bent

Always Historicize

A dozen or so years ago, not long after I had finished my doctoral dissertation at the University of Amsterdam, I compiled for myself a list of required reading in an effort to catch up with what was going on in the more glamorous and theoretically sophisticated world of literary criticism. One of the items I put on my list was *The Political Unconscious* by Fredric Jameson.[1] With some effort I managed to work my way through it, cover to cover, though I'm afraid I don't recall much now of what it said. Yet it would be hard to forget the book's provocative opening line: 'Always Historicize'. Talk about a great way to begin a book.

What I remember especially is the significance of this imperative to the school of thought to which Jameson could be said to subscribe, which I took to be a generously diluted form of Marxism. 'Always Historicize' is a different way of saying: if only you make the effort, you'll find that there is nothing that *cannot*

To retain the playful spirit in which this paper was delivered, I have chosen to keep editorial changes to a minimum.

[1] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

be historicized, nothing that *cannot* be shown to be conditioned by the peculiar time and place in which it happens to find itself. Everything is the product of historical change, and everything must ultimately succumb to the unrelenting forces of historical change. In human history, we are not constrained to accept anything as naturally given, as the way things must necessarily always be.

The significance of this for a Marxist scholar, or indeed any scholar with a progressive agenda, is that it allows unlimited scope for political action. If we are unhappy about societal conditions we see around us, it helps to view them as mere accidents of history. That way we can start envisaging a future that might break with the way things have always been. So the imperative of 'Always Historicize' is also a different way of saying: whatever the political status quo may happen to be, it can never be justified by an appeal to historical necessity or inevitability.

When someone like Jameson calls upon us to 'always historicize', it is worth asking: to historicize instead of doing what? What is it that we are urged to do not even once in our lives? The answer, I suppose, must be: to look for something that is universal, that is transcendent, something that must be equally valid and true for every culture and historical period, that is beyond all difference, somewhat like a law of history.

This is not just because laws of history, if we accept them as real, tend to discourage political action — given that it is clearly pointless to oppose that which is immutable. There is also our problematic Western legacy vis-à-vis other cultures, historical periods, minorities, and the underprivileged. This is a legacy of knowing what's best for them, of knowing their true nature and their real interests better than they do themselves, and of writing their history from a position of such comfortable certitude. Given that legacy, as we keep reminding ourselves, it would be at best foolish, at worst breathtakingly arrogant and patronizing, to continue to presume that we can establish what is valid and true, and has been, for all humans at all times and places. Those historians before us who had that presumption, it is now agreed, were merely projecting their own values — the values of white, male, bourgeois university professors — onto people whose lives they could not begin to understand.

Since we, too, may still lapse into that error, we, too, need to appreciate that our values are specific to our culture. If we do not appreciate that, or so the reasoning goes, we are bound to project them unthinkingly, no matter how well-intentioned we may be. So it is our own values that need to be examined more urgently than anything else. How do we do that? Of course: by following the imperative of 'Always Historicize' to the letter. Take any aspect of our society that is invested with value, historicize it, and it will turn out, again and again, that even our most casual assumptions and perceptions are narrowly contingent on the culture we inhabit. In recent years we've had cultural histories of smell, of

death, of the breast, of food, of physical beauty, and many, many other things — and, in my own beloved field of medieval musicology, of musical sound and of music listening. The search has been on, to paraphrase Baxandall, for the period ear.[2]

I have to confess that I find these studies absolutely fascinating, and cannot resist buying more and more of them. I devour them all. I must confess also that, to my mind, there is something truly impressive about so earnest an effort, not just to recover the materials and facts of history, but to understand how people felt about their world and experienced it.

At the same time, all this is bound to have far-reaching consequences for what we take history to be. Consider this. The moon and the stars we see today are the same as they were five hundred years ago, odours and smells have the same chemical composition as they had back then, the breast or any other part of the human anatomy has not undergone evolutionary change, and the sounds of organs and lutes still have the same composite frequencies of sound. We live in the same material universe, we share the same DNA. How do we reconcile that with the imperative to always historicize? Isn't there something perverse about that imperative, as if we are at pains to deny a common-sense truth that is staring us in the face?

There is only one way that we can 'Always Historicize' in spite of that truth. It is by making a distinction between things and events in the real world — heavenly bodies, odours and smells, parts of the anatomy, or musical sounds — and the human experience of them, the way they are perceived, the values ascribed to them. Things and events in themselves are historically meaningless so long as we don't know *who* is experiencing them. For the historian, they cannot even be said to exist in *any* meaningful sense, except as perceived from some particular viewpoint — a viewpoint that is necessarily historically contingent. Only God can know things as they really are. So there is really no history, or at least no history we can hope to know, outside of human consciousness.

And there is no human consciousness or it works with what we now like to call constructions. For example, there is the objective, physical reality of cigarettes in the real world, and there is the construction of cigarettes in our minds — a construction that may not even be the same now as it was ten years ago. For some of us, cigarettes may conjure up the image of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, or of French intellectuals pontificating about existentialism at 3 a.m. in a Parisian jazz café. For others they may now suggest: bunch of

[2] Michael Baxandall, *Painting And Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972).

total losers sheltering somewhere in the pouring rain outside a public space, and coming back breathing and smelling horrible.[3]

Where do we find the evidence for these constructions? First and foremost in language, in texts, in ways of speaking about things, in words and phrases. But by extension we can also read other types of materials as texts — not because they are, but because even paintings, musical works, or household objects, are susceptible to close reading, and may prove to have much to reveal about the values of those who fashioned them. In the last resort, everything made or left by humankind can be read as discourse — at least if we define discourse as that which is open to reading.

So, to take one example, although the breast, as a physical object in the real world, may not have undergone evolutionary change in thousands of years, the constructions by which it has acquired significance in the minds of historical actors have differed widely. And it is the history of those differing constructions that we call the cultural history of the breast.[4]

Ruptures

It is typical of cultural histories of smell, or food, or death, that they are *episodic*. They do not present continuous narratives of slowly evolving perceptions, but rather tend to offer snapshots, based on selections of evidence that are sometimes surprisingly narrow. One reason for this is that we have lost the taste for comprehensive master narratives, for universal histories.

Another, probably, is that we no longer see the particular virtue of exhaustiveness. To capture the texture of life, the flavour of feeling, in another historical period, you don't need a statistically significant sampling of the evidence. One isolated piece of evidence might be all you need. If scrutinized patiently and imaginatively, it could reveal a universe of conceptual meaning.

Indeed, one of the favourite narrative strategies in our time is to begin an essay with a seemingly random piece of evidence, usually presented in the form of an engaging story, to proceed by subjecting it to tenacious critical questioning (all the while bringing other evidence into the picture), and thereby to end up problematizing and defamiliarizing the whole thing — to the point where readers must abandon everything they might previously have taken for granted, and are ready to join the author on a fresh enquiry. When you deal with the past, or so the moral of the tale seems to be, nothing is ever quite what it

[3] Richard Klein, *Cigarettes Are Sublime* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

[4] Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

seems. Always historicize, always defamiliarize. Now, if you can accomplish that much with a single piece of evidence, then who could possibly need exhaustive documentation?

Yet I think there is also another reason why cultural histories tend to be episodic. The imperative of 'Always Historicize' implies that we cannot ever assume common ground with people in other historical periods, no common basis on which to compare and evaluate. Whatever we believe we might have in common will turn out, after proper historicizing (such as we must *always* do), to be merely the projection of our modern values. The past is a foreign country, and the people who inhabit it are strangers. They are the Other with a capital O. And nothing could be as dangerous as to delude ourselves into thinking that we're really like them, and they're really like us. Self and Other, both written with capitals, truly are the proverbial apples and oranges that cannot be compared.

So it is as if we are inhabiting a little bubble: a bubble that's floating in nothingness, a sealed and self-contained conceptual world called the twenty-first-century West. Trapped within that bubble, we are trying to imagine the one thing we cannot possibly know: what it is like to live in another bubble. And what is true for us must be true for other historical periods as well: they are foreign countries not only to us, but also, necessarily, to each other — more bubbles floating, as so many islands of time and space, in the void.

This is what history has become. The imperative of 'Always Historicize' means that although different communities in history may inhabit the same *material* world, they are also inescapably trapped each in their own, self-enclosed *conceptual* worlds. Naturally it is impossible for us to imagine the sight of our own bubble floating amidst others, since that would presuppose that we could momentarily step outside of it, and thus escape the prison of historical contingency. That would be like imagining, say, what the Big Bang looked like from the outside, when in fact there was no space, no time, no matter, and hence no conceivable vantage point, outside the exploding universe. Only God can have such a view of history. We are marooned within our bubble, and we have lost not just the taste for master narratives — that's really God's job — but the very possibility of writing them.

For how are we to write a continuous narrative of history, if different periods are like foreign countries to each other, and all of them are like foreign countries to us? If we are to do justice to each of those periods on its own historical terms, if we are to always historicize, then what are we to do about the fact that they follow one another in time, and cannot help sharing material artefacts and customs? Surely there must be some kind of transition between them, some kind of continuity? Surely we need a model to define and explain the kinds of transitions and continuities that might have existed?

This brings us to the perennial problem of historical change — what it is, how it occurs, and how we explain it. Cultural histories avoid that problem by being episodic, by taking big leaps between distant points in time, so that we really don't know when or how, in between those leaps, we'd gone from one period into another. But most of the time the problem is avoided in a different way.

Consider once again the bubbles floating in the void. If historical periods relate to one another as self-contained bubbles, then of course they cannot evolve smoothly one into the other. There can only be radical breaks between them. And that, nowadays, has become our preferred model of historical change. As historians we have become extraordinarily interested precisely in those historical moments that are like the fault lines between shifting tectonic plates — chasms between worlds that are not only different but incompatible.

The preferred term for such moments is *ruptures*. Foucault postulated such ruptures between what he called *epistèmes*, deep core axioms that provide stability and coherence to thought systems over long periods of time. But the idea of the rupture has only truly become influential with the concept of the paradigm shift, as worked out by Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend.

Ruptures are not historical events taking place in the real world. You cannot see one happening, like a meteor hitting the earth and wiping out the dinosaurs. It is more like the Philosophy Master breaking the news to Monsieur Jourdain that he has been speaking prose all his life. I now quote from Molière's *Bourgeois gentilhomme*:

Monsieur Jourdain	But now, I must confide in you. I'm in love with a lady of great quality, and I wish that you would help me write something to her in a little note that I will let fall at her feet.
Philosophy Master	Very well.
Monsieur Jourdain	That will be gallant, yes?
Philosophy Master	Without doubt. Is it verse that you wish to write her?
Monsieur Jourdain	No, no. No verse.
Philosophy Master	Do you want only prose?
Monsieur Jourdain	No, I don't want either prose or verse.
Philosophy Master	It must be one or the other.
Monsieur Jourdain	Why?
Philosophy Master	Because, sir, there is no other way to express oneself than with prose or verse.
Monsieur Jourdain	There is nothing but prose or verse?

PHILOSOPHY MASTER	No, sir, everything that is not prose is verse, and everything that is not verse is prose.
MONSIEUR JOURDAIN	And when one speaks, what is that then?
PHILOSOPHY MASTER	Prose.
MONSIEUR JOURDAIN	What! When I say, 'Nicole, bring me my slippers, and give me my nightcap,' that's prose?
PHILOSOPHY MASTER	Yes, Sir.
MONSIEUR JOURDAIN	By my faith! For more than forty years I have been speaking prose without knowing anything about it, and I am much obliged to you for having taught me that.[5]

Here's a rupture happening before our very eyes. The world is not materially different, Monsieur Jourdain's speech is still the same, but the tools by which he brings it to consciousness have changed, changed forever, irreversibly.

All this makes sense. If we tend to locate historical reality primarily in human consciousness, rather than in things and events in the real world, it follows that truly *significant* historical change must happen in human consciousness also.

As historians we are fascinated by ruptures, and we've started looking for them everywhere. We're *not* all that interested in what lies between them. In fact, in order for ruptures to be the truly ground-breaking cracks in the surface of time that we imagine them to be, we have a certain stake in representing the periods in between as fundamentally stable. After all, how dramatic can a rupture be if the ground had already been crumbling for most of the preceding period? Our favourite metaphor for that stability is not period, but *system* — not unlike like the operating system on a computer. An operating system may be patched up almost indefinitely (and must be if it's Windows), but ultimately its limitations can only be overcome by the full and irreversible installation of a new operating system — one that completely erases the computer's history up to that point. After that, we might occasionally find traces of old files and programs on the hard drive, and may recover them patiently, but we'll never be able to make them work in the new operating system. We can only preserve them, as decontextualized material artefacts, in the museum of our computer's history.

So history ends up looking a bit like the earth's crust. Placed in historical sequence, the bubbles have become massive tectonic plates rubbing against one another, without any kind of smooth transition. Humankind, in its path

[5] Molière [Jean-Baptiste Poquelin], *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, II. 6; trans. by Philip Dwight Jones in *The Middle-Class Gentleman* (Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger Publishing, 2004).

through history, moves from one plate to the next, but can only do so by leaping across ruptures. It's a bit of a bumpy ride, certainly when we compare it with the triumphant march of evolutionary progress that we were once thought to have embarked on. But then it's all a matter of consciousness, of things happening in the mind — unlike the tangible milestones in the real world by which we once measured human progress.

Still, none of this really answers the problem of historical change. Nor does it answer another, equally thorny problem: that of historical stability, of permanence. What is it that guarantees the stability which is thought to prevail between two ruptures? Is it sheer inertia — like choosing not to replace Windows by Linux because it's too much hassle? Or is there a persistent effort at work, an effort to keep things as they are. Some things will indeed change if you leave them alone. Medieval Latin was a living language, and was bound to keep transforming over time. By contrast, Humanist Latin, especially of the pure Ciceronian kind, has become a dead language, and it takes a special effort to keep it pure over time. (A similar development can be witnessed with Palestrinian counterpoint, soon after it was redefined in opposition to the *seconda prattica*.)

So what is the nature of the effort here? Are forms of discourse, are thought systems, ways of viewing the world, inherently self-preserving and self-perpetuating — a bit like the selfish gene travelling from one generation to the next? Or are we talking about power, political power, discursive power, complete with its instruments of propaganda, repression, and censorship? Are discourses defined, and held in place, by the things they exclude, things whose very existence or possibility they must deny, because they are too threatening even to contemplate? Recall, for example, the endless battles that have been fought to keep dissonance out of Western music, or at least to keep dissonances in their place. Such deep-seated anxiety at the root of a seemingly stable musical system.

I spoke earlier of avoidance, and larger issues like these are indeed easily avoided when there is still so much close reading for us to do. Yet I think that there are also more compelling reasons why we're perhaps not especially eager to theorize on the level of long-term history, on the level where we can survey entire centuries in one panoramic vision. The main reason is that it runs counter to the imperative of 'Always Historicize'. If we start theorizing about long-term history, if we start devising models that encompass several historical periods in one go, aren't we homogenizing rather than historicizing, aren't we creating theoretical sameness rather than historical particularity? Doesn't all this smack of the grand master narratives of old, the kinds of universal histories that we are trying to move away from?

It's not hard to understand some of the criticisms that have been leveled against the imperative to 'Always Historicize'. A history that is located largely if not wholly within human consciousness, a consciousness under which every

illusion of historical reality must be subsumed as well, runs the risk of lapsing into the solipsistic fallacy, the fallacy of denying any kind of meaningful reality outside of our perceptions, or those of others. The consequence is that no discourse can be subjected to verification or falsification, since the evidence that might prove it right or wrong is also necessarily the creation of that discourse. So we really are trapped in circularity — another fine mess we've gotten ourselves into. Perhaps musicologists feel this even more acutely than our brethren and sisters in neighbouring disciplines, since we cannot bring music to life, not even in our minds, without making assumptions as to how it should sound, assumptions that will inevitably, and circularly, find their way into our conclusions as to how, in fact, it did sound.

The biggest casualty in all of this is the pursuit of truth — as opposed to relevance, or meaning, or significance, which have become the hard currency of historical inquiry nowadays. Even to mention truth as a casualty must seem hopelessly naïve. Indeed how could it otherwise, if any truth we might hope to find must immediately be historicized — always, *always* historicized — after which it will inevitably prove to be merely a discursive practice, relevant only within the bubble that we are condemned to live in. And yet, if we are so irredeemably trapped within our discursive universe, then how could we possibly harm distant historical periods just by generating knowledge about them? Is there any way that we could ever *not* harm them, except by generating no knowledge at all? And doesn't even this idea, that we are doomed never fully to understand the people inside another bubble, presuppose *some* notion of truth? After all, by what other criterion than *their* truth can our projections be exposed as the distortions we confess them to be? And if we are able to invoke that criterion, doesn't it mean that we've somehow broken free from circularity after all? Isn't there something vaguely essentialist about all of this?

This brings us to another well-known criticism: in an effort to do away with metaphysics, postmodern scholars are merely allowing it to crop up in other places. In fact, a sure sign that something is stealthily assuming the place of truth, and beginning to serve as a kind of transcendental signifier, is when we start writing words with a capital, and take away the article — the Other, Patriarchy, Voice, Difference, the Body. If we are to always historicize, shouldn't we be asking: whose voice? whose body? other than what? difference between what? Or indeed, which particular male chauvinist pig? A certain philosopher whose writings I also included on my reading list, but which I remember rather better, once said that you cannot attack metaphysics without having it slip in some other place. We simply do not have the power to kick it out the front door, unless we allow it to enter in a different guise through the bathroom window, where no-one will see it.

The Crisis

Up to this point in my paper you could say that I've tried to apply the imperative to 'Always Historicize' to what's been going in historical enquiry today. I have done so in an effort to obtain reflexive distance from my own involvement in all of this. If my analysis strikes you as a bit one-sided, and lacking in nuance, then that is probably due the stake I have had in these issues. It would probably be fair to say that I'm writing now as a lapsed postmodernist, for I've had a sense of unease about the way things are going for several years now. It's time to come clean.

Two years ago I published a monograph entitled *The Crisis of Music in Early Modern Europe*.[6] In it, I argued that there was a major turning point in the history of music that took place some time in the 1470s. I didn't call that turning point a rupture, though to my mind it certainly was, and I did in fact use the term 'paradigm shift'. This turning point, I argued, marked a thorough reconceptualization of what music is, what it does, what it is worth, how you should listen to it, and what place you should (or shouldn't) accord it in your life. What the turning point did *not* mark, at least not immediately, not until the mid-1480s, was a perceptible change in musical style, one that we might be able to demonstrate in concrete musical works. For the change really took place in the realm of mentalities, sensibilities, and attitudes — not unlike the way our attitudes towards cigarettes have changed in the last thirty years, even though a cigarette is still a cigarette.

So the subject of the book really was discourse, discursive practices. There is not a single musical example in the whole monograph, yet there is a wide selection of textual materials — poems, decrees, letters, diaries, chronicles, polemic writings — in which people of varying stations articulated their attitudes towards music. This is probably where I owe the greatest debt to the 'Always Historicize' school of thought. I might not have so persistently searched for texts like these, and scrutinized them so patiently, if I had not been inspired, some ten years ago, to radically historicize music listening in the late-medieval and early modern periods, and to organize a conference about it at Princeton.[7]

The preferred approach in my book was close reading, and my readings were aimed especially at recovering the semantic fields of certain recurring key-

[6] Rob C. Wegman, *The Crisis of Music in Early Modern Europe, 1470–1530* (New York: Routledge, 2005; paperback repr., 2007).

[7] The proceedings of this conference were published under the title 'Music As Heard: Listeners and Listening in Late-Medieval & Early Modern Europe' = double issue (3–4) of *The Musical Quarterly* 82, (1998), 427–691.

words and metaphors — particularly the persistent and revealing slogan that polyphony is 'empty', which implies that music is some kind of container. And predictably enough, the book started with a little story, of a seemingly minor incident that occurred in a town in Eastern Germany in 1489 — an incident that seemed to me to encapsulate all the issues at stake.

As for the book's main thesis, certainly it was paradoxical, not to say provocative, to propose a turning point around 1470. For actually that is four decades into a major period in music history, the Renaissance in Music, which in college textbooks is still thought to run from the 1430s to 1590s. According to those textbooks, nothing especially earth-shattering was happening in the 1470s, except perhaps the death of Dufay.

Needless to say, the discrepancy here is due to different assumptions as to what music history really is. The Renaissance in music has traditionally been defined in terms of concrete, tangible changes in musical style: the so-called *contenance angloise* in the 1430s and the invention of monody in the 1590s. For me, on the other hand, discourse came first, musical style second — because to my mind, if we don't understand the contemporary discourse, we wouldn't actually know *what* to look for in fifteenth-century music — and so by default we would end up looking for the things we're familiar with in later repertoires. That would represent an obvious failure to historicize.

So you really have two brands of music history, so different in their basic premises that they cannot even invalidate each other. One is a history of musical style and compositional technique, of tangible works that are made, and of the great men who made them. The other is a history of sensibilities, of thoughts and feelings. And it was the latter kind of history that I had sought to write.

So why, you may ask, the unease? You've been a good boy, you've made all the right noises as a postmodernist, and no-one can level that most humiliating of all criticisms at the book — that it is theoretically naive. Well, the unease really has to do with one nagging doubt. Wasn't the argument of my book in a sense a foregone conclusion? Didn't the picture I sketched owe more to the models I applied than to the realities of musical life in the fifteenth century? This is why I devoted the first half of the present paper to theory, to show that there appears to be an independent theoretical necessity for our preferred models — especially the concept of rupture — to be the way they are, irrespective of what time in history they are subsequently applied to. They are, in that sense, ahistorical, and paradoxically violate the very imperative to 'Always Historicize'. Given the attraction of these models, wasn't I bound to seize upon a moment of rapid discursive change, wasn't I bound to think of it in terms of a paradigm shift, and to make a claim for its historic significance on those terms? Is all long-term history now to be funnelled through this one model of historical change?

During the writing of the book, I found myself responding to these concerns in a number of predictable ways. As if to overcome my own doubts, I began to aim for exhaustiveness in documentation, and indeed found a certain pleasure in the symptoms of that old-school disease known as TBC, Total Bibliographical Control. Suddenly I felt an affinity with German historians of the nineteenth century, whose commentaries to classical and medieval texts are still unsurpassed — as if I had discovered the tradition that I truly felt I belonged to. My bubble, at last!

Although *The Crisis of Music* began as an article, and wasn't originally even planned to be a particularly long one, it grew and it grew. By the time I passed the 40,000-word mark, I realized that I'd better start looking for a publisher. The exhaustiveness — persuasion by quantity rather than interpretive ingenuity per se — was at bottom an attempt to break free from circularity: the historian in me was not satisfied, at least not until I finished the fourth chapter, that the change was as widespread and ground-breaking as I thought it to be. A standard of historical truth began to creep in, a truth presumed to be beyond my own discourse as well as that of the period in question, transcending both bubbles, as it were.

The Truth

And yet, as we say in therapy, I felt kinda conflicted. The postmodernist in me was bound to dismiss such a standard of truth as an illusion, a mere projection, a failure to historicize. But then that same postmodernist has left a number of pressing questions unanswered.

To take just one question, what does it take to prove something wrong *regardless* of the discourse it belongs to? Is there even such a thing as 'wrong'? For example, when the President of Harvard University makes a statement about the intellectual abilities of women as compared to those of men, and invokes empirical research in his support,[8] is the resulting debate a clash of two discourses, and is he expected to resign (apart from other reasons) because one of the discourses happens to be more influential than the other? Or is he wrong in a more objective sense, in having perhaps misread or misinterpreted the empirical data he invoked? I suspect it's the former. For as far as I can see, the issue here is not whether empirical evidence can or should settle the question at

[8] Lawrence H. Summers, Remarks at the National Bureau of Economic Research Conference on Diversifying the Science & Engineering Workforce, Cambridge, Mass., January 14, 2005. Published by the Office of the President of Harvard University on the website ⟨http://www.president.harvard.edu/speeches/2005/nber.html⟩ [Accessed 11 March 2010]

hand, but rather that the very question is offensive in the first place, and ought not to be submitted to such a test, no matter what the outcome might prove to be. This is how discourses work: there are questions that make no sense, thoughts that are unthinkable, things too offensive to even dignify with empirical enquiry. So our Harvard President is neither wrong nor right, you might say, he has just blundered into the wrong discourse. Within the confines of that discourse he may well be right, but since it's not a discourse whose premises we share, that's not something to lose any sleep over. Just because you can raise a question doesn't mean that there is any point to answering it. At the same time, the question might no longer seem quite so offensive if we set out to find, along with the Grateful Dead, that the women are smarter. Within discourse, truth is contingent.

I must confess that for me there is something deeply unsatisfactory about this. As a scholar I do not need to know 'the truth', I don't need to be God, I don't need to be superior to anyone — all I need is to know when I'm in error, without a discourse to protect me or to hide behind. Otherwise, what is discourse but a conglomeration of interests and investments, and at the root of it all, fears? Without some working definition of truth, what will unbridled proliferation of meaning, unchecked by verification, do for us, except make us indifferent to meaning altogether? This is the first question that the postmodernist in me cannot answer.

Yet there is also another question. What is there to stop these bubbles from shrinking ever further, all the way to Euclid's indivisible point? From within our modern bubble, as said before, we can never fully know what it was like to live in the fifteenth century. But as a scholar, I also cannot claim to know what it's like to be a woman, I cannot speak for African Americans, I'm bound to misunderstand gay sensibilities, in Britain I can forever claim allowance for the fact that I'm a foreigner, which is a nice way of saying that I'll never understand what it's like to be a Brit. There is a postulated core of truth inside each of these mini-bubbles that represents, at once, a standard that outsiders are guaranteed not to meet, and yet is beyond any kind of verification outside the bubble. For all I know, that core of truth doesn't even exist, it might as well be a projection along with everything else. Presumably I, too, might be able to claim that no-one will ever understand what's it like to be me, depending on what mini-bubble I choose to claim for myself. If you historicize forever, there is just no end to the ways that you and I can be strangers to one another. There may be one material world, one reality for physicists to explore, but on the level of consciousness the world is exploding into an infinite number of particularized realities and contingent truths.

Theorizing is interesting only after the event: it's a way of bringing to consciousness what you've been doing. Not that the event itself, that is, historical

enquiry, is necessarily unreflexive or pre-theoretical. But the activity does rely heavily on intuition, and in my experience, theorizing stops you from hearing the voice of intuition, just as the encounter with source materials kindles that voice.

However, by the time I had finished writing *The Crisis of Music*, I had strayed so far from the postmodernist path that I didn't want to theorize even after the fact, and decided to publish it without an introduction. In hindsight that was probably a bad idea, because reviewers don't have the time to figure out what you've been up to, unless you offer a convincing interpretation of your own book. Then again, didn't Lyotard define the postmodern condition as the distrust of meta-narratives, as the realization that narrative-as-performed carries its own authority?[9] (Great! So now I have a metanarrative to justify not having a metanarrative.) And do postmodernist historians not commonly regard scholarly enquiry as a kind of performance — to be distinguished from pure theory, which is not nearly as entertaining as the telling of history?

I would say yes. And that brings me to the crux of the issue. I would claim that there is nothing so entertaining about the telling of history as the truth that's being proposed, as the idea that maybe this is how it really was — however illusory that may seem from other perspectives. We can tell the most wonderful narratives, the most richly satisfying stories, but let people know that the truth of the matter was almost certainly quite different, and they don't want to hear them anymore. Romantic fictions, once exposed, are rejected out of hand. We *want* performances of Bach or Mozart to be authentic, the way they sounded at the time: it's not just the quality of the performance per se, it is the thought that maybe this is what people *really* heard in the eighteenth century.

This attitude is not necessarily uncritical, on the contrary: it is hypersensitive to falsification. When I watched the HBO television series *Rome*, there was something so seductively realistic about the way it was produced, that I wanted to know precisely what was and was not backed up by evidence. In some cases I wanted to read the evidence for myself. Why? Precisely because I did *not* want to buy into patent falsehoods, because that would diminish my enjoyment. Whenever I found that historians had criticized this or that aspect as contrary to the historical record, I felt disappointed at the makers of the series, and felt like saying to them: couldn't you have just *tried* to get that right, so as not to spoil the whole thing for us?

As a lapsed postmodernist I don't know what label to put on myself, except perhaps that of a performer or entertainer. In that case, the entertainment value

[9] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

must reside in what I can establish, with reasonable plausibility, about medieval musical life, both material and conceptual. Like musical performers I tend to rely on intuition, which so far has never failed me. It told me to compile that reading list, twelve years ago, and now it tells me that there is lots of fun to be had with the things I was trained to do as a student.

With great pleasure, I will go on research trips to find watermarks, with a view to dating the layers of Burgundian choirbooks with new precision, and perhaps shedding new light on methodological issues in watermark research. I will be happy. But I can already hear some of the colleagues in my discipline say: watermarks is positivistic, datings is positivistic, documents is positivistic. Sure. But that's where the performer in me will have a job to do: to write about these things in a way that interested readers will find entertaining and enlightening — *prodesse et delectare*, as Horace said. (For terminal *ennui* in scholars, or boredom as a coping mechanism, there is of course no cure, except anti-depressant medication.)

To that end, it will help a lot that today I have tried to figure out why, as a medievalist in a remote millennium, I feel that this is how I can be of most use to others. I'm not offering this as a polemic or an attack. It's not that I want to avoid debate, but I also don't want to speak for anyone other than myself. Frankly, and speaking only of my own discipline, I am tired of people telling the rest of us what we should be doing. In most cases what they're really telling us is how uncertain they are if they should be doing it — especially if no-one were to join them. I wouldn't want that implication to be read in this contribution. This is a personal statement, if you like — maybe you could even say it's the introduction I never wrote, and wisely never printed. You're welcome to take issue with it. Perhaps I will change my mind about some of these things, and perhaps I'll find that the postmodern project is more inspiring that I gave it credit for. But there it is: my two cents today.