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Stanley Mellon: An Appreciation

History 101 at the University of Michigan more than fifty years ago had hundreds of students assembled in one of the major lecture amphitheaters. Stanley Mellon was the instructor, and his first words to us were “My business is the past.” It was an unforgettable entrance.

Stanley, who died in San Francisco on September 3rd, always had an instinctive feel for the dramatic. As a child, he, his brother, and his father played a game in which they assumed roles in a story or took sides in an debate. This early inculcated habit of oral and dramatic presentation never deserted him. He remained, as have many writers, an aural composer. He heard the sentences first and then wrote them down. He had in addition a passion for the unexpected connections history offers, the small manifestations of continuity, imitation, or echo, a fine sense of timing, a capacious memory, and a style that was direct, sharply focused, and unadorned by modifying clauses. From that first experience, in 1957, Stanley became my ideal lecturer, and eventually I would shamelessly mimic him.

At the outset of his career Stanley was thought by all to be destined for fame or, rather, academic stardom. He had studied with Jacques Barzun at Columbia as an undergraduate and then R.R. Palmer at Princeton. He had impressed both men. Michigan was his first job. He didn't stay that long, but he did invigorate the European civilization course. He introduced a modification of the Columbia Western Civ course, based on documents, with the two volumes edited by Thomas Mendenhall, Basis Duke Henning, and Archibald Foord, long out of print and use. But it was the lectures that made the course.

At the end of the 1957 academic year Stanley announced from the podium, with his now familiar sense of theater, that there comes a time in every historian's life when he has to stop talking about history and write some himself. He went off to Berkeley to do just that. As virtually all of us, though perhaps more successfully than many, Stanley turned his dissertation into his first monograph: *The Political Uses of History: A Study of Historians in the French Restoration* (Stanford, 1958). It was a remarkable achievement, not only for the quality and extent of his scholarship but for the novelty of its thesis.

Historiography, which in the 1950s was scrutinized and sometimes pulverized by the philosophers, was always a significant part of what constituted a historian's training and thinking, but it was mostly detached from historical circumstances and presented as a separate study. The dialectic between events (and those who made them) and how historians later talked about those deeds was divorced from its historical context, and the writing of contemporary history, the history of one's own time, was scarcely treated. Linking contemporary historians (themselves often historical actors) to their times, incorporating into a single narrative how history was written, why it was written, when it was written, and the place it held in the literature and culture of the times, while also assembling the familiar materials of reconstructing what happened in the past, this was an original undertaking. We all know that Michelet's republicanism, severely jarred by Louis Napoleon's *coup d'état* profoundly influenced his *History of the French Revolution*. We similarly know that Treitschke's German history is a celebration of

Prussian hegemony, written in the long shadow of Bismarck's unification. What Stanley did is something more than these easy generalizations.

This study first seeks [he writes at the beginning of his book] to demonstrate that the writing of history in the French Restoration was a function of politics – this might be called the minor thesis. Its major intention is to illuminate the politics of the Restoration by examining the historical writing of the period.

In Stanley's Restoration virtually every step in the politics of the day was accompanied by a kind of running gloss on the French Revolution, whose interpretation not only shifted to elucidate contemporary politics, but also was imbedded in the political discourse of the day, made the Revolution a living memory incessantly invoked and argued about, while shaping the scholarship and interpretation of the Great Revolution.

Both his major and minor theses are widely incorporated into historical writing today. Fifty years ago the phenomenon was rarer. *The Political Uses of History* was well received. It was instrumental in getting Stanley to Yale. Perhaps more significant than the usual nod, however favorable, of the historical profession in America was its reception in France. The book wasn't translated into French – an apotheosis whose advent mostly escapes me, for French publishers, as their American counterparts, are notoriously more interested in making money than in propagating ideas – but *père* Bertier de Sauvigny, the *doyen* of Restoration historians, liked it very much, and he and Stanley became good friends. I learned from Stanley that Father Bertier loved American hamburgers and hot dogs, a little-known fact. François Furet, for quite different reasons, was interested in Stanley's work. When he came to Chicago for the meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies in the early 1970s he sought Stanley out. Plausibly Furet was then revolving in his mind the conceptualization of the French Revolution that would first bear fruit in his brilliant essays collected in *Penser la Révolution française* and then in *La Révolution: 1770-1880*, which was and remains, to my mind, the most sophisticated and probing presentation of the relationship of political history and historical writing we have: the Revolution seen through the lens of nineteenth century historical literature. I don't mean to suggest that Stanley's work influenced the best French historians, but he was on to something, which they recognized and appreciated.

It always seemed to me that Berkeley was a better fit for Stanley than Yale. Certainly having San Francisco across the Bay was deeply important to the *bon vivant*. He would, after several years living in New Haven, move to New York—he had been born in Brooklyn (in 1927) and loved the city. I would guess residence in New York did not endear him to the faculty at Yale, which for all its cosmopolitanism was bound to New Haven. The move also meant depending on Amtrak, the tragic fate of commuters.

He flourished at Yale as a teacher. He was a natural, although idiosyncratic, and at his best as a lecturer. His theatricality, his preference for a large rather than a small audience, perhaps the support of a written text (for he always lectured from a typescript, and his lectures were carefully prepared literate essays designed for aural presentation). He also liked being on stage where he controlled the dynamics of the occasion. He always committed much of his text to memory and seldom looked at the pages before him. His narrative line was strong and informed by a critical intelligence, with the occasional insertion of a telling anecdote, always related with relish. The story of Napoleon, having escaped from Elbe and landed in the south of France, marching toward Paris when he encountered Marshal Ney, sent to “bring him back in a cage,” is well known. In Stanley's telling it became riveting. He told the story of the Emperor baring his breast to the troops and challenging them to shoot him. He paused for maybe 10 seconds. He took a few steps back from the podium while the audience digested the drama. Then in a

complete change of pace, said in clipped and airy tones: “It is a matter of historical fact that the entire army went over to the Emperor.” Wild cheering erupts.

The student guide to teachers at Yale, completely unscientific and refreshingly un-statistical – there was no pre-digested form to fill out – was always enthusiastic about Stanley’s teaching: ‘brilliant’ was the usual description. And so it was. His preparation for these lectures was extensive, even obsessive. He presented the Camus-Sartre break, a relatively minor episode in the history of the Fourth Republic, only after having read everything he could about it. He read all of Malraux’s novels in the days before another lecture. This is typical. He had the great advantage, it is true, of reading very quickly: about 150 pages an hour, he once told me, in either French or English, and what he had read was present for the plucking. Nevertheless, he always wanted the materials he talked about fresh in his mind.

In a more intimate setting, his seminar on France 1815-1848, which I attended for a year, he was equally scintillating and scrupulously prepared. It is here that his historical erudition stood out, however matter-of-factly it was presented. He seemed to know the history of the Restoration and the July Monarchy day by day, and led us through that tangled web without a note. Along the way there were surprising caches of knowledge: the construction of the French railroad network, for example, with much detail about financing, planning, engineering. He had us read Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, and his elucidation of the text, tying it to the final years of the Restoration and the intricacies of French politics and society, was extraordinary. We read hundreds of pages of the French parliamentary papers, tough sledding but curiously rewarding. We read a Napoleonic memoir assigned randomly—I got Mathieu Molé. We read Tocqueville’s *Recollections*, and that seminar, when Stanley sat at the head of the table and began talking about Tocqueville, remains lodged in my memory as one of the most compelling intellectual performances I have seen. There was no room for discussion. Stanley filled all the space with his own appreciation and erudition.

I have and had two criticisms of the seminar. The first is technical. We barely got to 1848. The last few sessions were a scamper to reach the June Days. The second reservation is not so much structural as personal. The probing of a deeply learned master that leads the student to comprehension, as though it were his own miraculous discovery, was not an arrow in Stanley’s quiver. Stanley either could not do or chose not to do this kind of teaching where the instructor is a guiding but unobtrusive intelligence. It was not that he was impatient of others so much as that he was absorbed in his own thoughts. We might contribute to the line of reasoning and argument he was unfolding, but he would not turn aside and explore another path, consider another trajectory. He knew where he was going. Still, once led through a text by Stanley it was difficult ever again to see it differently than he did. This inculcation, this indelible imprint, is one of the marks of a great teacher.

Toward the end of his time at Yale he seemed more distant. His book on Guizot was largely completed in manuscript, but he was reluctant to write the conclusions and send it off: he had produced little else. There was a job at Columbia that he very much wanted and perhaps because he still had so many friends there he was overconfident. He later explained that he had made the mistake of letting the people at Columbia know how much he wanted the position. It was a sharp disappointment.

A few years later, when I had moved to the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle – the “Circle”, describing a huge cloverleaf of highways where the first Mayor Daley insisted the campus be located, has now been suppressed in the name of dignity – I got Stanley invited for a lecture and a possible appointment. His talk on Heinrich Heine, spy – for his name appeared on the list of agents for the July Monarchy – was scintillating. John B. Wolf, our senior

Europeanist, was anxious to hire Stanley. We read his manuscript on Guizot and the *Doctrinaires*—he was proud and ironic about his stamina and patience in reading all the *doctrinaires*—which was, to my mind finished, and the offer went out. Yale’s practice then was to superannuate young professors, giving them a title in place of a good salary. Stanley would double his income coming to The Circle. His was a prestige appointment and gave us a solid cohort of French historians, from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. John Wolf’s idea of a good European history department was to have as many French historians in it as possible.

Stanley continued to dazzle his auditors, but he missed the bright students he had taught before coming to UIC. The Guizot book never was published. Maybe sustaining his particular kind of brilliance over hundreds of pages – and Guizot is not the most invigorating personality—eluded him. He continued to write scintillating lectures on a vast variety of subjects—Heinrich Heine, Thomas Jefferson, aspects of Jewish history, Jacques-Louis David, Shakespeare, Tocqueville, and the complex but familiar phenomenon of being shaped by living in Paris, to mention a few—for his restless intelligence was always active. He went where his enthusiasms took him, and his range was remarkable. He talked wonderfully on whatever was currently engaging his attention, and some of the phrases in these memorable monologues found their way into the written essays. His talk was a dress rehearsal presented in various social settings among his friends, testing which formulations sounded and worked best.

He produced over the years a solid body of essays, and at one point I tried to get them published. The problem was not the quality of the work, which was acknowledged, but the fact that he did not have a big reputation. Precious few historians, at least in America, can collect their essays and publish them. It is difficult to imagine in American academe a publishing career to match that of H.R. Trevor-Roper, who wrote only one scholarly book yet held the most prestigious chair in British academe: the Regius Professorship. Cultural habits are hard to overcome, and Stanley’s essays and lectures remain unpublished, ephemeral. This, along with his failure to produce a “big” book, led him to think of himself as a failure.

Success is variously measured, most often by money. In academe the criterion is quite precise and narrow: publishing books, publishing them with the best houses, being warmly judged by those who matter, and being on the “cutting edge,” a border that is constantly changing. All the other things we do over a career in the academy fall by the wayside. The expectations of academe are clear. There are no substitutions, no excuses, and very, very few exceptions. Perhaps not unexpectedly there are also a remarkably large number of academics who have not, can not, will not publish; and some of them are among the most talented. I have no theory of why this is so, and those I have known who have been unable to fulfill their promise have had a variety of reasons for their writer’s block. In Stanley’s case there was no shutting down or attenuation of intellectual activity. He was engaged in scholarship throughout his career and long after his retirement. Unfortunately all this intellectual activity was undervalued and largely unappreciated by academe. He knew what he wrote was good, and he also knew it had no commercial future. This state of affairs is more corrosive than being unable to put pen to paper. In Stanley’s case the work was done, the essays written and publicly presented, and then filed, buried alive, so to speak. Because of this Stanley thought himself a failure.

As a colleague Stanley was superb. He was conscientious—almost alone among us he would read the dissertations of those applying for their first job—and kind. I never saw him savage anyone. He was always on the side of generosity and reasonableness. He disliked confrontations, and he disliked vulgarity. In the early seventies when our campus, along with hundreds of others, was shut down by the students to protest the war, Stanley, although

sympathetic, did not actively join in. Even more praiseworthy, he sought no revenge against those who had disrupted the ordinary rhythms of the academy. Quite the contrary: he supported them when they came under fire.

Columbia University, where he might have been, proved brutal to the faculty: Orest Ranum and Peter Gay were both denounced by their students and left Columbia for quieter schools. Stanley was also unmoved by the 'counter culture' but showed no overt hostility. Whatever Bill Clinton may have done, I can testify that Stanley, in truth, did not inhale, although often in the company of those who did. Experimentation of this kind was not in his personality.

After the campus had calmed down, the police were gone, and those arrested had mostly had the more serious charges against them dropped, the History Department, among other academic units, took its revenge. A number of junior faculty were denied tenure, and one of them was dismissed a year short of his formal tenure consideration, when all the official guarantees of due process and review could be flouted. Stanley was central in having the unorthodox and punitive dismissal undone. His championship of decency and fair dealing was not flamboyant, and I think he got little credit, or at least far less than he deserved, for his humane interventions. The aftermath of the anti-War movement embittered our department; the divisions were sharp and sour. Several times a number of us tried to get Stanley to run for the Chair, but he had no interest in the petty power, the increased salary, or the obligations of the office. He was convinced, as we were not, that running the department was beyond his capabilities and temperament.

Overall I think his years at UIC were disappointing. As he neared retirement he gradually but perceptibly lost his audience. It was the erosion of literacy among the students that dulled their appreciation. His lectures, carefully constructed, literate, with a clear yet subtle line of argument, were less and less appealing to our students than they had been to my cohort. He continued to write elegant lectures, but they were now more appreciated by a faculty audience than by students. The department, whenever called upon to provide a campus-wide lecture, unanimously chose Stanley as our representative. We always sent our best.

When he retired I was the Chair of the Department, and Stanley came to me to express his desire that no departmental celebration mark his departure. He wanted only an intimate dinner with his friends, which I hosted. We drank champagne and a good Bordeaux and ate rack of lamb. There was conviviality but no mawkish sentiment. Thus quietly did he pass into emeritus status.

In Paris and France Stanley was at his best. Paris fit him perfectly. He worked all day at the Bibliothèque Nationale and enjoyed the city at night. He first went abroad, to Lyons, in 1950 on a Fulbright. It was on this trip that he decided to become a historian rather than go into his father's cleaning business. It was France that proved his Damascus, and at least a part of his epiphany was chez Point, *les Pyramids*, generally acknowledged as the greatest restaurant in France. Ferdinand Point had closed his restaurant during the Occupation rather than cater to the Germans, but even in the austere and spare times immediately after the war he produced wonders. Almost every subsequent trip to France involved a pilgrimage to Vienne and Point's restaurant: the train to Vienne, a great meal, the night spent in a hotel, and then back to Paris. When Point's widow, "Mado," died and the restaurant closed, there was a long and melancholy obituary in *Le Monde*. It was the end of an era, the passing of a *temple de gastronomie*.

France's second city was not the most enchanting place for a year abroad, and Stanley had stories. His landlady insisted categorically, when asked for a recommendation, that there were no restaurants in Lyons worth a visit. Home cooking alone was good. Only after Stanley posed the question in the form "where would you eat out if you were absolutely unable to cook at home one night?" did he pry some recommendations out of her. He always loved telling the anecdote, perhaps apocryphal and certainly mythic, of the businessman from Lyons compelled to visit Paris who so arranged his trip that he did not have to eat a meal there. When he returned he explained "Paris c'est zero."

The importance of good food for Stanley was at the core of his behavior in Paris. He was that most Parisian of beings, a *flâneur*, a walker in the city with no special destination in mind beyond enjoying spontaneously the many pleasures of Paris. I often thought that of all the Paris hands I knew only Stanley could have identified and said something about what the myriad street names commemorated. The only conscious object of these walks was to find a restaurant for the evening meal. Stanley, so far as I know, never cooked for himself. He ate out every night in France and in America. All these "finds" he shared with his friends for he was generous and gregarious. He also found in his wanderings any number of urban curiosities. For all his inherent shyness, his need to control social situations and avoid surprises, he was able easily to engage almost anyone in conversation, in France. His American inhibitions vanished. In Paris he visited the shops that sold old engravings on the rue Lafayette – they're mostly gone now – and spent hours going through their folders of old prints, slowly building up an impressive collection of engravings from the French Revolution.

He took me to the Grand Véfour, that gorgeous restaurant in the Palais Royale where Voltaire and Napoleon, Balzac and Dumas *père* had once dined. Raymond Olivier was then the owner-chef, and the cooking was glorious. Stanley ordered a carafe of sparkling white wine that he told the *sommelier* he remembered with fondness. It was not on the wine list. "Ah," said the *sommelier*, "you know the House well." Whenever we were in Paris together he had found another restaurant or two to share. My stock of favorite restaurants, as so much else Stanley taught me, has remained with me, although not a few of them, along with chez Point, have disappeared.

From the time I knew him he had no affectations or snobbism about France. He spoke French fluently and well, but I never heard him do so to an American audience. Scrupulously he translated all French words and phrases into English when he taught. He did not, however, go so far that he anglicized all French words: he did not say "Prowst" for Proust. He pronounced French names for his students with an approximation of how they should be said, always aware, as he told them, that he could not, as with the famous novelist's name above – where the first syllable had to be gently exploded – do it as could a native speaker.

If Paris was a *flâneur's* paradise it was also an inexhaustible used book store, where he also wandered, both along the *quai* and on the mainland. The treasures to be found in the stalls of the *bouquinistes* had much declined since he first came to Paris in the 1950s, but he continued to haunt them, building a remarkable collection of the works of the great historians. The *Cinéma-thèque*, the greatest collection of movies in the world, and the more than two-hundred movie houses in the capital, were also a favorite destination, for he aspired, at least jokingly, to see all the movies ever made. He knew everyone working in French history, at least those of his own and earlier generations. The reading room of the Bibliothèque Nationale, then still on the rue Richelieu, offered a species of homecoming. So too did the professional meetings in America.

An early habit or manner of aloofness moved more and more to the center of his personality in his last years, when he was living in San Francisco. As his health deteriorated he cut himself off from many, and finally from most, retaining only his oldest friend, Bernard Wishy. Before this gradual isolation took over, he had the same sense of enjoyment and delight in life that I remembered. In 1996 my wife and I went to China to adopt a baby. When we flew home from Hong Kong, after twelve hours during which Sarah slept like the baby she was, Stanley met us at the San Francisco airport where we changed planes. Tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants had come to America by way of San Francisco, and Stanley insisted on welcoming Sarah. We were bleary-eyed from sleeplessness and exhaustion, but it was wonderful to see him there. He had a stuffed animal for Sarah and warm words for us, and he was delighted with the baby. He loved children, related warmly if somewhat formally with them, and doubtless this is another aspect of his life, not having children, that fed his sense of failure.

There were many qualities that made Stanley a great teacher, not least of which was his Pygmalion need to verbalize what he knew and loved. He had the urge to shape, although he did so by encouraging emulation rather than by insisting upon imitation. As a teacher he touched the lives of countless students, some only glancingly, others more profoundly. He had a gift, even a vocation in the old Christian sense of the word, and this gift spilled over into his scholarship. He seemed meant for brilliance in miniature, not unlike those great violinists who play short pieces with such commitment, elegance, and musicality that these small works are transformed. Stanley's miniatures, his essays and lectures, have an intensity of emotion, a concentration of erudition, an intellectual dexterity, all presented in a sharp, unacquered prose. It was certainly my good fortune, and doubtless that of many who had the chance to study with him, that these gifts for teaching and lecturing were so highly developed.

The ultimate sadness, I think, is that he was unaware of how many he touched and affected. Had he fully appreciated his intellectual and personal impact he would have realized his life was a success. But academe has no middle ground. One is either a publishing scholar or a descendant of Mr. Chips. Stanley was neither. He was more: he was a bit of both and that most rare of academic birds, a great teacher.

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