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Classic Natalie

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When I signed up to give a seminar on the topic of “Classic Works of History since 1750” at the University of Chicago in Spring Quarter 2019, I knew that one of Natalie’s books would appear on the syllabus. The only question was which one. Every single one of her books had been consequential for my own work, both substantively and imaginatively. Even before I had the pleasure and privilege of getting to know Natalie at Princeton, her sharp eye for the telling detail, her ability to coax revelations from the most laconic sources, and, above all, her daring in opening up whole new areas of inquiry, from popular errors to personal identity, had been an inspiration to me. So my problem was *embarras de richesse*, especially given the time constraints of the ten-week quarter.

Before I tell you which of Natalie’s books I eventually chose and why, I should explain why I was teaching a course on classic works of history in the first place. Among an audience of mostly historians, the very idea of a “classic work of history” might raise eyebrows, and for good reason. First and foremost, history is an empirical discipline. Indeed, it is the original empirical discipline: the ancient Greek verb, *historein*, means “careful inquiry,” often with the connotation of strenuous, firsthand inquiry. This is why Herodotus’ great compendium of ethnography, travelogue, comparative religion, and account of the Persian War is entitled *The Histories*, and why Aristotle described his detailed observations of animals as a “*historia*,” the study of particulars in contrast to the universals of philosophy and poetry. This sense of “history” is fossilized in the term “natural history,” which is all about natural particulars, with or without a temporal dimension. When the stock of empirical inquiry of all kinds, from statecraft to medicine to geography to philology, rose steeply in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, “*historia*” was still the word used to single out the most comprehensive and careful investigations of phenomena—as in Francis Bacon’s vertiginous to-do list of histories to be compiled about everything from the “history of the winds” to the “history of life and death.”

Because history in the modern sense remains an empirical discipline, our work is subject to the same fate as all other empirical disciplines: it is soon outdated. New discoveries, new sources, and, especially, new perspectives can transform an influential secondary source, once de rigueur reading in all graduate seminars, into a musty primary source, assigned, if at all, as a period piece illustrative of the follies and errors of a bygone era. As much as in the natural sciences, the shadow side of advances in empirical research is that all such works are doomed to obsolescence. That is probably the main reason why the only works that historians will reliably agree are classics of their discipline are works of historiography, not works of actual history.

The second, related reason why the very idea of classic jars the historian's sensibility is that we are that oddball among the humanities: a discipline without a canon. In contrast to our colleagues in literary studies or philosophy, we no longer train our graduate students by having them read Herodotus, Thucydides, Tacitus, Al-Biruni, the Bamboo Annals, Venerable Bede, Gibbon, Mabillon, Ranke, Guizot, Mommsen, & co. While the philosophy students are still learning what it is to do philosophy by an intense immersion in Plato, Aristotle, Avicenna, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and other past greats, the history students are cutting their teeth on the latest secondary literature—once again, the mark of a fundamentally empirical discipline. Older works, however worthy, have been outstripped by the exploitation of new sources (e.g. images, maps, paleogenetics) and new perspectives (e.g. the histories of gender, the book, sites of memory). We don't lose the old sources: even if the history of the French Revolution is being written anew for each generation, the same sources once consulted by Michelet, Soboul, Furet, and Ozouf are still part of the repository of evidence. But they have been supplemented and re-evaluated in light of new sources and new questions. If we historians have a pantheon of classic texts, it is a pantheon in every sense of the word: a marmoreal graveyard, revered but rarely visited by the living.

So why was I teaching a course on classic works of history since 1750? Not primarily for the historians (although a number of those students signed up) but for my main charges, the graduate students in that peculiarly University of Chicago institution, the Committee on Social Thought: an eccentric amalgam of philosophy, political and social theory, theology, literature, and, yes, history—at least in principle. Social Thought students are required to take a Fundamentals Examination based on a list of books they have chosen in each of these categories, representing works both ancient and modern and some at least read in the original language. I have now reviewed dozens of these lists, and I have rarely seen a modern work of history listed. Instead, under the obligatory history rubric are listed, over and over again, Herodotus and Thucydides, Thucydides and Herodotus. Now, I am second to none in my admiration of Herodotus and Thucydides. But history writing did not stop c. 400 BCE. When I and the two other historians (David Nirenberg and Joel Isaac) on the Social Thought faculty roll our eyes and plead for more variety on the Fundamentals Lists (which are richly diverse and balance ancient and modern in all the other categories), the students retort: "Name us other classics in history, modern ones." The gauntlet thrown down, I finally picked it up: hence the unlikely seminar on classic works of history since 1750.

As I said, I knew from the outset that one of Natalie's books would be on the syllabus of ten books, one for each class meeting. When I thought of my own generation of historians, especially but by no means exclusively those specializing in early modern European history, I can think of no one whose work has been more mind-stretching. And mind-stretching in so many different directions, providing models for how to rethink our deepest assumptions about how cultures stratify not only socially and economically but also mentally (*Society and Culture in Early Modern France*), on justice and the market (*The Gift in Sixteenth-century France*), or the possibilities for reconstructing the self under what are apparently the most restrictive conditions, from Arnaud du Tilh to Maria Sybilla Merian to Leo Africanus. Moreover, all of these books were models of a double perspective, at once microscopic and telescopic. By peering very closely at the smallest details, by reading them not only against the grain but between the lines, Natalie was somehow able simultaneously to weave a dense tapestry from a few archival threads *and* to detect a vast pattern in a single episode. More than once while reading Natalie's work, I have been reminded of that virtuoso observer, artist, and pattern-maker Maria Sybilla Merian.

Because I knew that few of my students would have had any firsthand experience of doing archival research, especially archival research in remote locales without well-preserved and well-organized collections, I also wanted whatever book of Natalie's I chose to reflect the extraordinary challenges of historical fieldwork: not just tracking down what few shreds of manuscript and published evidence that may survive, but also figuring out why these fragments and not others constitute the archive, reading all of the sources with and against each other, achieving the kaleidoscopic vision of seeing the same pieces again and again, but rearranged by different perspectives. As every historian knows, the archives are a site of elation and despair—even if you are lucky enough to have the archives gathered and tended under that name (the Public Record Office, the Archives nationales, the Geheimes Staatsarchiv). Piecing together a coherent story and a faithful one out of these odd shards can feel like being told to spin a roomful of straw into gold—and Natalie is a genius of this art. Her stories do not just persuade; they enthrall.

Finally, I wanted a work of history in which the historical imagination takes center stage. I wanted to give my students an example not only of superb historical craftsmanship, the deft interweaving of threadbare sources into damask narrative, but also of what can't be cited in a footnote: the leap—no, better, the *plunge* of the imagination deep into another time, another psyche, another world. I did this with some trepidation: my students (perhaps yours as well) have been raised on a hermeneutics of suspicion. In the age of fake news, they understandably suspect hidden agendas everywhere and demand proof for everything. How would they respond to a book that tells the reader up front that “What I offer you here is in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past” (p. 5) or contains sentences like, “But the obstinate and honorable Bertrande does not seem a woman so easily fooled, not even by a charmer like Pansette. By the time she had received him in her bed, she must have realized the difference, as any wife of Artigat would have agreed, there is no mistaking ‘the touch of the man on the woman.’” (p. 44)

Yes, I assigned them *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983), and no, I did not show them the film (dearly though I'd have loved to have pointed out Natalie's cameo appearance to them). I wanted the students to exercise their own imaginations. I wanted them to appreciate the carefully chosen sixteenth-century images that attune the reader to the period eye, and which will inevitably be overwhelmed by the vivacity and density of film images, so much easier for the twenty-first-century eye to digest. I wanted them to be confronted with the scrupulous attention to the sources, their silences as well as their utterances, and the tough-minded common sense of observations like “Not that Arnaud [the imposter] was the only liar in Arrigat: we have just caught Pierre Guerre [Martin Guerre's uncle] in a falsehood, and we will hear others before we are done. But a big lie, a whopper—especially one imposed by a single person on others—has troublesome consequences both for personal feelings and for social relationships.” (p. 59)

Even more, I hoped that readers convinced that personal identity is the foundation of politics and as indelible as the biometric markers with which they unlock their iPhones would suddenly take stock of the things, ideas, and institutions that have solidified those identities: the seamless documentation of lives from birth certificate to social security card to diplomas to credit ratings; the Romantic notion of the unique individual; the mirrors and selfies that fix our own faces in memory. No one who has grown up with Facebook is a stranger to the idea of imposture. But the story of Martin Guerre, Bertrande de Rols, Arnaud du Tilh, and the whole village of Arrigat raises

much deeper questions about whether we can be who we say we are without a flicker of recognition in the eyes of family and neighbors. To return to those absent mirrors for a moment: recall the moment in Jean-Paul Sartre's play *Huis Clos* (1942) when the three characters condemned to hell after their deaths are surprised to find themselves in a drawing room furnished in the style of the Second Empire—perhaps not the most agreeable of decors, but a long way from the flames and torments they had been expecting. But slowly the terrible truth dawns on them: there are no mirrors in their Second Empire drawing room; the only reflection of themselves will be literally in the eyes of the others: a hell for existentialists like Sartre, bent on self-determination at all costs, but a fate perhaps not so unlike that of Natalie's sixteenth-century villagers. I wanted the students in my seminar to encounter such social and psychological possibilities not dreamed of in their philosophy—and not in the form of airy abstractions but in a history of real people conjured into vivid life by a classic work of history.

What I alas could not do in class was to conjure up Natalie herself. I wish I could have, because meeting Natalie, precepting in one of her classes, and being warmly welcomed into her home is one of my most enduring memories of being an assistant professor in Princeton in the mid-1980s. This was my first experience of being a member of a history (rather than a history of science) department and a second apprenticeship in new ways of thinking—and also new ways of being.

Thinking first: In the history of science of the 1980s (and, in some quarters, long thereafter), the unit of research and writing was the case study. Perhaps because so many of us came from backgrounds in the sciences, our notion of a case study was inductive: a detailed examination of one event in the service of a grander generalization, usually a sociological and/or philosophical generalization, about science *tout court*. The detail was recounted less for the sake of capturing a past moment in living color than of detecting the causal mechanisms at work—as I said, most of us were trained in the sciences. A case was a well-chosen data point that ideally allowed us to extrapolate to the shape of the curve. The lesson Natalie's way of doing history taught me was no less empirical, but it was not the empiricism of induction. Rather, it was the empiricism of synthetic observation guided by a sure sense of which phenomena are likely to be the key that unlocks a puzzle or problem. Not all observations are equal; some are a great deal more significant than others. Instead of choosing episodes that were allegedly typical or representative, as the case study did, Natalie deliberately chose anomalies, the sort of story that would end up in Pierre Boaistuau's *Histoires prodigieuses*. But not just any anomaly: of all the weird stories on offer in the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles* or the *Histoires prodigieuses*, Natalie chose one that in its very strangeness would be revelatory about quotidian lived experience: the microcosm rather than the case study.

Natalie's way of being was even more important to me. When I first arrived in Princeton, the senior historian of science, a man who was the very model of a scholar and a gentleman, said to me ingenuously: "I really don't know what we'll talk about. We've never had a woman in the Program before." There were three women assistant professors starting that year in the history department, as different in our interests, manner, and appearance as it is possible to be; we were regularly confused with one another by our male colleagues: "Eve? No, Marta—or is it Raine?" It was not so much a matter of discrimination but lack of discrimination: we were all much of a muchness in their eyes (even allowing for scholarly myopia), and we clearly made many of our colleagues socially uncomfortable, which of course also made us fidgety and tongue-tied. In stepped Natalie, who welcomed us with warmth and excellent advice, and whose presence lit up

any gathering like a thousand-watt bulb, most especially the dreaded Davis Center colloquia in the dim basement of Firestone. She was our model of how to be a woman scholar: brilliant, bold, and endlessly kind. We admired her, we still admire her to distraction. And our name is legion.

I saved *The Return of Martin Guerre* in my seminar on “classic Works of History since 1750” as the *pièce de résistance* for the last week of term, when attention is waning and energy is flagging. The book jolted the class awake like a double espresso, and the class debated whether and why and how this book deserves the accolade of a classic work of history with the same vigor with which they had argued the merits and demerits of Hirschman, Marx, Braudel, Pocock, de Tocqueville, and other assigned texts. But there was one important difference: many of them told me afterwards, “I never knew history could be written like this.” A classic work of history must be fertile not just in new sources and ideas but in new models of how to do history. *The Return of Martin Guerre* has been that in spades—classic Natalie.

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