

**A NEW CIRCLE FOR DANTE'S HELL
OR, HISTORIANS AND THEIR SUBJECTS**

Edward Countryman
(Southern Methodist)

Long before I ever thought I would be making regular trips to Milan, I was exposed to Dante's *Divine Comedy* in an undergraduate course on medieval and renaissance literature. Perhaps my strong memory of reading Dante then is a tribute to the teaching I received. Perhaps it grows from the power of the subject matter. Whatever the reason, I return to the great poem every once in a while, perhaps when I am feeling rather like the narrator as he finds himself midway in life's journey, and lost. I rarely revisit the Inferno or Paradise. My interest always takes me to the Mountain of Purgatory. Perhaps that is because the characters we encounter are active participants, going someplace, rather than immured in their endless punishments or enjoying their static bliss.

Once in a while I invent a new circle in the pit which is the setting of the first canticle. This circle is reserved for historians only. Our punishment is obvious: we shall spend all eternity with the shades of the people we got wrong, and they will prove to include every single person we ever studied. They will tell us continually how badly we got them wrong.

That is mere fancy. It emerges not only from reading Dante fairly young but also from having grown up Catholic just before John XXIII and *aggiornamento*, which amounts to saying that in important ways I grew up medieval. Yet in a way my imagined new circle in hell does speak to the responsibility that I assume every time I enter a class room to teach or boot up my computer to write. Remaining within the world view that my imagined circle expresses, I might say that I play God. I make my living by presuming to pull people out of their graves and set their lives in motion once again. Not only do I try to resurrect them, I also presume to explain them, at least to my world if not to theirs.

It is an incredibly arrogant enterprise. My particular subject might have left behind a mountain of evidence, as did George Washington, Elizabeth Cady

Stanton, or Joseph Brant (Thayendanagea), the Mohawk Indian who spoke for his own people and for many other Iroquois who chose the British side during the American Revolution. For all that we can know about such a person, s/he still remains entirely capable of surprising us, just as a living person with whom we live closely can do.

Wanting to understand Washington (arrogant thought!) I once ventured a paper in Milan which suggested that beneath his marmoreal exterior he was the very embodiment of tensions. Looking at the changes he made, I suggested that he transformed himself repeatedly during his lifetime. He moved from anxious provincial to proud Virginian, from tobacco planter to wheat farmer, from Virginian to continental figure, from man of agriculture to capitalist developer, and from unthinking master of slaves to a person who acted, if late in life, on the recognition that slavery was entirely wrong. If one source is correct, he even thought about moving North, if it came to it between North and South. I suggested that Mount Vernon is the perfect metaphor for him, disguised as a house of stone when in fact it is wooden, held together by the internal tensions of beams and joists. Just possibly, I added a little bit to knowledge of a person whose every minute seems to have been recorded.

But the subject might have left only a scrap, as did a New Jersey woman named Mary Hay Burn writing to her soldier husband in 1776. "Why should I not have liberty," she wanted to know, "whilst you strive for liberty." A sentence that powerful has to have been written by somebody used to wielding a pen, but as far as I am aware those are her only surviving words. Yet I have pondered about Mary Hay Burn and what she wrote ever since I found it deep in a massive nineteenth-century printed source. I know from her letter that she was thinking in immediate terms about the threat that she and her children would be evicted from their house. But I extrapolate from that to the proposition that American liberty had to mean something to her if it meant anything at all. I extrapolate still further to suggest that both her immediate words and the meaning I pull out of them tell us something about the thoughts and the dreams of many people in addition to herself.

Am I right, either about George Washington or about Mary Hay Burn? They cannot answer back, so at least I am safe. I am playing God, at least until Clio consigns me to the appropriate circle where Washington and Hay Burn will not be the only persons to castigate me.

I also am playing clinical psychologist, and I am no more qualified to play that role than I am to play God. For the last several years I have been taking part

in a Saturday-morning group that brings practicing psychoanalysts, medical academics, and students of the humanities together for intense discussions of shared readings. Some of what we read is classics of psychoanalytic literature, Freud, Klein, Winnicott, Lacan, and their ilk. Some of the reading is psychoanalytically informed humane scholarship, including Johan Huizinga and John Demos. Some is belles-lettristic. One session examined a children's book, *The Velveteen Rabbit*.

Each text has both a clinical discussant and one from the humanities. I always have been suspicious of historians' occasional efforts to use psychological and psychoanalytic insights on dead subjects, who cannot answer back. The insistence by the clinical members of the group that real insight comes only slowly from the intense interaction of analyst and analysand bears out my suspicion. Historian who seeks to explain, beware! My home-made circle of the Inferno awaits.

Yet that is precisely what we do and what we must do. Many members of that very stimulating group are students of literature, and on some occasions an interesting dialogue develops between them and the clinical people. To a man and a woman, the literature specialists are interested in texts. Their field has well-developed canons for using psychoanalytic principles to explicate texts, but they remain interested in the systems of signs which are their chosen field of study. Invariably the analysts respond that their concern is not with socially-constructed modes of representation but with clients in great pain who have come to them for help. I find myself siding with the analysts, both because of my own experience as a client (which could be taken as identification on my part) and because I too am dealing with people as well as I can, allowing that the people in question are dead.

So my first responsibility is to the people I presume to study. Unlike an analyst's client they did not choose to commit their lives and thoughts and dreams and fears and successes and disasters to my keeping. Perhaps they never intended that the evidence through which I know them would survive across two centuries, let alone be subjected to close attention using concepts that they could not have comprehended. Some, of course, did intend at least that their words be saved and read. When Washington and his like began saving their papers during the American Revolution it betrayed their sense that something important was happening, that their thoughts and actions were central to it, and that their memories might well endure long beyond their own deaths. But I still presume a great deal when I open the volumes or spool up the microfilms that contain their

own frozen words. My first responsibility is to them, and that responsibility is to get what I say as “right” about them as I possibly can, knowing always that I might be very wrong.

Clinical analysis has real consequences for the analysand. Borrowing clinical concepts to study the dead most likely has consequences only for the person doing the borrowing, for better or worse. During the past two years, however, I’ve found myself involved in an intellectual enterprise that has had huge consequences for living people, a Native American land case in the Federal Courts. I was one of a large team of historians, including a fellow member of the Milan Group. The case appears to be settled, but the process is not complete so I cannot go into details. It would seem that I never will need to write my expert report, testify, or face cross-examination from lawyers who have tortured all my published writings for evidence of bias. It also would seem that my thirteen file boxes of documents will sit until I write a book about the case, if I do.

Working as a consultant I bore a huge responsibility. I was employed by the Indian Nation through their lawyers and I did face an implicit obligation to contribute to a favourable outcome. But like a forensic consultant I also was expected to stay professionally neutral. The lawyers’ discussions and strategies remained separate from the issues they raised with the historical team. They wanted all the evidence, good and bad, because they were sure that “the other side” would find it too.

I learned quickly that what they did not want was piety, theory, and generalization. My own sympathies are with the losers of American history and with the people who have struggled against great odds to make the United States live up to its high and pious rhetoric. Those people most definitely include many Indians. But no court and no jury wanted my rhetoric, as I learned from watching the grilling of an expert witness in a parallel trial that was underway. Just the facts, as Sergeant Joe Friday used to say on the television program *Dragnet*.

Yet there came a point when the bare facts made all the difference. The “other side” brought a motion for summary judgment based on a series of factual assertions. In such a motion the facts are not supposedly in dispute; the judge alone decides their import. The particular set of allegations would have had the effect of completely de-legitimizing the Indians’ main case, and even their collective existence within the state where they were seeking restitution. Like several other historians on the team, I was deployed to check the record. Two of

us, working separately, found facts that incontrovertibly refuted the basis of the motion and preserved the Indians' legal existence. The judge ruled entirely in favour of them. That alone justified the entire effort. It probably also contributed mightily to the out-of-court settlement that appears to have been reached.

My responsibility as a historian was to do what I did: search all the possible sources and find all the evidence that bore on the matter. I would have had that responsibility even if the evidence had gone the other way. Dealing with that outcome would have been the lawyers' concern, not mine. No theorizing was required, or wanted. Sometimes, though, we do have to theorize if we are to make any sense at all of difficult evidence. Most times our dead "clients" have no lawyers to argue their own interests. Yet to them, as to the Indian Nation for which I had the privilege of working for a while, my responsibility remained the same: get my job done as well as I could and as fully as I could, always aware that I still could be wrong but doing my best to be if not "right" then at least honest.