Paul Robinson

Becoming a Gay Historian

I

I feel slightly fraudulent writing an essay about how I became a historian. Truth to tell, I am not sure that I am a historian, even though I have spent forty years as a member of the Stanford History Department. My sense of identification with the historical profession is less than complete, and I often think that history has simply provided a convenient intellectual home for my diverse and unconventional interests. I suspect that intellectual historians are especially apt to consider themselves outliers within the profession. Often they feel greater affinity with members of the literature and philosophy departments than with their fellow historians. Of course one might argue that history's great virtue is precisely its tolerance for diversity, its willingness to let individual scholars pursue their demons.

My early years, spent in and around San Diego, gave little indication that I would one day become an intellectual, never mind a historian. I was always an overachiever and a grade-grubber, but I had no real intellectual interests. Most striking for someone who would spend his life writing books, I was not a reader. The only exception was L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, which I practically committed to memory, without any awareness, apparently, that it might mark me as queer. I was exquisitely attuned to the pleasures and conventions of Southern California life in the 1950s. My neighborhood of

three-bedroom homes was completely white, without even a Jew, all the mothers housewives, and everyone except my parents Republican. I was devoted to being with-it, which meant wearing the right clothes (my t-shirt sleeves turned up exactly two times) and driving a cool car (a 1951 Mercury, lowered, leaded, with pipes).

Ironically, my obsession with cars provided me with the first occasion to exercise my mind. I collected automobile advertisements from magazines. I also made trips to the local dealerships to gather brochures. The intellectual exercise consisted in my organizing these ads and brochures into a strict hierarchy from Cadillacs, Lincolns, and Chryslers at the top to Chevrolets, Fords, and Plymouths at the bottom. My collection perfectly reflected the vulgar commodity culture of the 1950s, but at the same time it let me apply my powers of analysis and judgment to bringing order to a mass of random particulars. Today I own a Cadillac, proving Freud's contention that our deepest wishes originate in childhood.

My high school singularly failed to introduce me to the charms of history. There were no courses on European or world history, only a state-required U.S. survey, which was badly taught and consisted mainly of dates and personalities. My one brush with genuine intellectual passion came from two dedicated teachers of English and American literature. In the American class I became transfixed by Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*, which was the subject of my first extended piece of writing. I have avoided looking at the novel since, for fear that it would confirm my baleful adolescent tastes. My paper advanced the ludicrously provincial thesis that *Look Homeward, Angel* was "the great American novel." Still, it marked an important step in my emerging identity as an intellectual and a writer.

Although I lacked intellectual interests, I became deeply interested in politics. I date the onset of my political awareness to the 1948 election, when my family voted for Truman while the rest of the neighborhood voted for Dewey. My father must have been impressed by my precocious convictions, because he asked me if I understood the difference between Democrats and Republicans. "Yes," I answered, "Democrats are from the South, while Republicans are from the North." He immediately corrected me: "No, Democrats are for the poor, Republicans for the rich." In that moment my ideological formation was complete.

Even more central to my young life than politics, however, was music. Early on music became the source of my most intense emotional experiences, and it also contributed more substantially to my intellectual growth than did either books or teachers. As a small child I listened repeatedly to my paternal grandmother's 78 recordings of two pieces by Beethoven: the Emperor Concerto (performed by Artur Schnabel) and the Appassionata Sonata (performed by Artur Rubenstein). Although neither of my parents was musical, they gave me piano lessons, and, most important, they let me buy my own record player. In the 1950s I became a member of the Columbia Long-Playing Record Club, through which I gradually acquired a collection of orchestral classics from the long nineteenth century. To this day musical Romanticism remains my aesthetic center of gravity, and when I later came to appreciate literary Romanticism (above all, Wordsworth), it was as an extension of my earlier love for the music of the era. In my career as a historian, I eventually figured out how to incorporate music into my scholarly work, notably in *Opera and Ideas*, which I consider my best book. It is the most striking instance of continuity in my intellectual and emotional life.

Listening to my records and later playing some of the pieces in the local youth orchestra introduced me to a distinctly historical way of thinking. Essential to my experience of this music was the idea of development. First at the level of individual careers, above all Beethoven's, I attended to the evolution of the composer's art—from the Haydnesque classicism of the First Symphony to the grandiose romanticism of the Ninth. More important, the entire history of orchestral music in the nineteenth century impressed me as a single story of development, in which the harmonic, rhythmic, and orchestral techniques of Beethoven were elaborated and enriched by his successors, from Schubert to Strauss. When I became an intellectual historian, I imported this conception from the history of music to the history of ideas. But I must immediately add that the idea of development was not the same as the idea of progress, for it did not follow that the later (more developed) works were of greater merit. I believe the same is true of the history of thought: it is a story of development but not necessarily of progress. Music, then, provided me with a powerful yet supple idea for thinking about the past.

I should not overstate the intellectual nature of my response to music. In *Opera and Ideas* I argue that intellectual history can illuminate the history of music, but from the beginning my response to music has always been more visceral than conceptual. Whenever I felt gloomy (about which more in a moment), I would closet myself in my bedroom and put on a Toscanini or Szell recording of one of the Beethoven symphonies, and my spirits would lift. You could say there was a tension in my reaction to music: it had an important mental dimension—it was good for thought—but it also drew me away from the mental into a realm of unutterable emotion. Today I still spend a great deal of time listening to music—admittedly, more opera than instrumental music—yet, even

though I have made a career writing on the ties between music and ideas, my primary response remains emotional.

Unmentioned to this point is the subject about which I thought more intensely (certainly more anxiously) than any other and to which much of my scholarly work would be devoted: sex. Until puberty I had led a conventional, if uneventful, heterosexual life. I pursued a series of childhood romances with little girls in the neighborhood—usually with remarkable persistence and reasonable success. True, I was a disappointment to my athletic father, but otherwise I was a manly little boy. Indeed, my automobile collection put me at the stereotypical end of the 1950s masculinity spectrum. But when I entered puberty, I discovered a sudden and mysterious attraction to boys. It was a profoundly distressing experience, which I remember comparing to the earlier discovery that I suffered from a seizural disorder: "You thought that was bad," I reflected, "but it was nothing compared to this." Just as I had kept my seizures hidden (until my attentive mother confronted me about them), I knew instinctively that my untoward sexual desires must remain secret. Outside of a few enclaves like New York and San Francisco, homosexuality was unthinkable in the 1950s: there was not even a public language with which to designate it. I don't recall whether I entertained the vain hope that it was just a phase and I would eventually return to the heterosexual ways of my childhood. But, given the intensity of my feelings, I think I knew I was in for a long, hard siege.

In freshman year of high school, homosexuality, as it were, went from theory to practice. I was seduced by the oboe player in the band, a senior. The experience was ecstatic, confirming in spades that my attraction was neither passing nor trivial. It also contained important lessons for how homosexuality was to be thought about and dealt with

under conditions of extreme repression. For one thing, the affair was conducted in utter silence, both in bed and in our daily interactions as friends and fellow band members. The silence was more than a matter of personal reticence: what we were doing was unspeakable, in the literal sense that no discourse for it had yet been invented, at least not in the middle-class suburban universe I inhabited. Even more revealing, my seducer was engaged to a flute player in the band, whom he had got pregnant and who, in a wonderful irony, played the Virgin Mary in our school Christmas Pageant. The lesson was clear: regardless of what you might desire or even do, heterosexual union was everyone's destiny. Perhaps there was a further lesson for the future historian: things were not necessarily as they seemed. The Virgin Mary might be having sex. "Joseph" might be queer.

There were more "boys in the band," and over the course of the next four years I managed to have sex with at least some of them. But I was careful to maintain a heterosexual front. Calling it a "front" isn't exactly right, because, unlike the straight dating recounted in so many gay autobiographies, for me pursuing girls was neither distasteful nor entirely bogus: after all, I intended to get married eventually. I was in fact a fairly ardent wooer of one girl in particular, though I may have been relieved that her puritanical views guaranteed that we would never get beyond heavy necking. Even here there was an interesting gay twist. My chief rival for the girl's affections managed to figure out what I was doing with boys. After a party he followed me and a mutual acquaintance to an isolated location where we were carrying on in a car. He later made menacing allusions to what he knew, but, significantly, he never took advantage of his

knowledge to prosecute his case with the girl we were competing over. Even for an interested party, the subject was unspeakable.

In *Gay Lives*, my study of homosexual autobiography, I complain that the story of the closet and its exit is often exaggerated. The typical American gay autobiography is constructed as a Manichean opposition between the darkness and emptiness of the closet and the authenticity and joy that come when the truth is announced. Paul Monette's *Becoming a Man* is the locus classicus of this narrative. Monette insists that his closeted existence was in fact a living death, in which nothing really happened to him and everything he accomplished was phony. From a political perspective it is a useful narrative. But I suspect that for many, perhaps most, gay men of my generation—the quintessential closet generation—it seriously misrepresents a more complex reality. Certainly it does in my case. To be sure, being in the closet was a source of constant and often intense anxiety. One could fairly say it cast a long shadow. But it did not obliterate the satisfactions of my life or render its achievements meaningless. On the contrary, I remember these years as much for their gratifications and successes as for their central misery. I enjoyed my interesting, liberal, funny parents, who were the envy of my friends and entirely devoted to my happiness. Friendship too was important and valued, especially in high school. I was also proud of my academic accomplishments, although, as noted, they were as yet ungrounded in any serious intellectual commitment. I even took pride and pleasure in my girlfriend, despite the fact that our relationship served to remind me of my shameful sexual secret. Most of all, I found an almost transcendental joy in the music-making and music-listening that were so central to my daily life. Historians of homosexuality properly consider the 1950s a uniquely bad time, marked by suffocating

repression, McCarthyite hysteria, and a pervasive, unexamined heteronormativity. Yet when I revisit the 1950s in my mind, I think first of the warm, sensual summers at the beach, of my academic and personal successes, of the people I loved and enjoyed, and, not least, of the ecstasies (rather than the agonies) of my first sexual experience. If there was a lesson here for the future historian, it was doubtless an appreciation for ambiguity. Nothing was as bad as it seemed, even if there was always something to worry about.

Music and sex, then, were the great preoccupations of my young life, and music and sex would become the most important subjects of my work as a scholar. They might appear to inhabit opposite poles in my psychic life, music belonging to the realm of thought and aesthetic contemplation—the realm of sublimation, as Freud would say—while sex was rudely material, fleshly, and in my particular case illicit as well as dangerous. But in reality the two realms were not opposed to one another. The very fact that my sexual adventures took place in the band created an existential link between the two. More important, sex and music were united by the intensity of the emotions they unleashed in me. I later discovered a substantial body of aesthetic theory, from Plato to Koestenbaum, that associates the musical with the erotic. My enduring intellectual concerns are less disparate than they might at first appear, and they are deeply rooted in the experiences of my early life.

II

I went to Yale in 1958. Without question it was the most fateful event of my life. College always changes you. But in my case the intellectual distance between my

mediocre, provincial high school and the sophisticated culture of Yale was categorical. I do not believe it too grandiose to say that Yale introduced me to the life of the mind. It placed me in the sustained company of powerful and charismatic thinkers who not only taught me a great deal but quickly became models for what I myself wanted to be.

Yale also confirmed my sense of my abilities. Although I got straight A's in high school, I had scored indifferently on the SATs, and no one from my school (so far as I knew) had ever gone to an Ivy League university. I feared—and Yale anticipated—that I would fall into the middle of my class. But in fact I excelled from the beginning—not, I'm sure, on raw intelligence but on determination and discipline. By the end of my sophomore year I had settled easily into the assumption that I would go to graduate school and become a scholar, indeed become an intellectual historian.

That makes too neat a story of my Yale experience. In reality my route to an academic identity was more tortured, as might be expected from the unsettled emotional estate in which I departed high school. Certainly the most improbable development of my undergraduate years is that I became a serious Roman Catholic, which dramatically set me apart from the majority of my classmates, the nominally Protestant sons of New York businessmen, primarily intent on following in their fathers' footsteps and (during their sojourn in New Haven) getting laid. I am tempted to say that I was a convert to Catholicism, because it felt like a conversion, but in fact the history of my religious opinions was more complicated. My maternal grandmother had become a Catholic as a girl when her family put her in a convent. She was a lovely, modest woman, who would play an important role in my life over the next few years. Out of respect and affection for her—but ever more half-heartedly—my mother raised my brother and me as Roman

Catholics, which meant Sunday mass, catechism classes, first communion, confirmation, and—the most dread item—confession. I can recall as a child taking a certain polemical interest in the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism, but religion was marginal to my life. The main source of my worldliness, I'm sure, was my Voltairean father, who made no secret of his anti-clericalism and whose profane and filthy mouth was a constant source of delight to me.

In the most immediate sense my Yale conversion resulted from the powerfully seductive influence of one of my freshmen roommates, a scholarship boy from New Jersey who had himself converted to Catholicism in high school. He was very smart and articulate, with a particular gift for philosophical argument, which he applied to me with relentless zeal. I recall being aware of a barely suppressed erotic undercurrent in our relationship. He was not attractive, but when we had had enough to drink (which was a large part of undergraduate life in those days, even among the pious) he became inappropriately intimate. He was the first example of what would become a pattern in my Catholic friendships: almost all of them had a distinctly homoerotic feel. And in fact many of these friends eventually came out and pursued openly gay lives. When I later sought to make sense of my Catholic phase, I concluded that sex was the key to the matter. I became alienated from my zealous and oppressive roommate even before I left the Church, and I lost track of him after college. But I heard that he had become a radio evangelist in the Midwest.

Through him I was introduced to a number of other Catholics, the most influential of whom were two graduate students from Holy Cross, one studying Renaissance history with Hajo Holborn, the other writing a dissertation on Carlyle in the English Department.

What most impressed me about these two was that they combined piety with sophistication. Their devotion did not keep them from being fierce critics of the Church, with more than a suggestion of heresy. From them I also learned that becoming a Roman Catholic did not entail becoming a political reactionary. On the contrary, like most of my Yale Catholic friends, they were firmly on the left. Moreover, the fact that they were both getting Ph.D.s fed into my own emerging scholarly identity. The young historian also served another function: he was the first opera queen I met, a discovery with both sexual and aesthetic implications. He invited me to his apartment to listen to recordings. I particularly remember his trying to persuade me that Joan Sutherland's Lucia was preferable to Maria Callas's (a deeply wrongheaded judgment, as I knew even then). The faintly homoerotic atmosphere of these sessions hinted at an affinity between opera and sexual dissidence, an affinity I would explore in my essay "The Opera Queen." Later in life, without having entirely repudiated Catholicism, my historian friend got involved in the gay pornography business.

Over the course of the next three years I became deeply enmeshed in Catholic life at Yale. Before long I was going to church every day, indeed often serving mass at the crack of dawn. In the summers I went to daily mass with my maternal grandmother, whose selflessness served as a model for what I wanted to become. Inevitably I started to think that I might have a vocation. Celibacy, after all, was the permanent solution to the sexual problem. I don't know how close I came, but I could well have ended up one of those priests exposed years later for sexual misconduct with their charges. In my junior year, members of Opus Dei, the Spanish Catholic organization with Fascist connections,

tried to get their fangs into me. They sent emissaries from their Boston house, where I attended more than one weekend retreat.

There was an unmistakable Oedipal element in this entire exercise. My poor father, so abjectly proud of me, was devastated by my newfound religiosity, which he viewed as a repudiation of his enlightened values. He greeted the prospect that I might become a priest with horror. I don't remember that he ever called the Church "l'infame," but the word exactly captures his sentiments. At the conscious level our relationship had always been good, but clearly there remained unconscious tensions, which even then I suspected had something to do with my sexual predicament. He died of a heart attack early in my senior year, just as I was beginning to liberate myself from Catholicism and re-embrace the rationalist values we had long shared.

When I think about my Catholic experience in psychological terms, I am convinced that it was at bottom an effort to deal with my homosexuality. It was, in effect, a ritual of avoidance. The great practical advantage of becoming a Catholic was that it categorically prohibited me from indulging my desires. Indeed, it made even thinking about those desires illicit. In just the years when, according to Alfred Kinsey, male libido is at its peak, I invoked the aid of this ancient religious tradition to block out the very thought of sex. It was, moreover, an extremely successful strategy: I would be in my mid-twenties before I again had sex with a man. At the same time, I was seduced not just by the prospect of avoiding sexual depravity. The main attraction of Christianity was the promise that it would transform you—that, in Saint Paul's words, it would replace the old man, slave to the body, with a new man, born to freedom and virtue. For three years I entertained the hope that I would undergo such a transformation, and I threw myself into the rituals that

were supposed to make it happen. Precisely the failure of that effort led to my eventual disillusionment with Catholicism. Despite years of daily mass and enforced chastity, I was, I found, the same flawed creature I had been from the start. In a word, conversion didn't work. It was at this point that Freud came to my assistance: in Freud I found the great critic of conversion, the thinker who, more than any other, insists that our ability to change is drastically limited. We are condemned to remain the self we have always been.

I have spoken so far about the psychological import of my undergraduate turn to religion. But it was no less significant for my intellectual development. In an important sense, Roman Catholicism was the main vehicle through which I found my professional calling, even though it encouraged a habit of mind antithetical to that cultivated by the historical profession. Put another way, Catholicism made me a serious thinker, but not a properly disinterested one. My undergraduate education consisted of a dialectical negotiation between the believer's pursuit of theological truth and the historian's commitment to impartial understanding. Admittedly, the opposition is overdrawn, for historians are seldom morally neutral, and theologians are not immune to evidence. But there remains a fundamental difference of sensibility between the two enterprises. In my undergraduate courses and writings I was often torn between these contradictory impulses.

I did not take a history course until my sophomore year. My first inclination was to study philosophy. I enrolled in a survey of the history of philosophy, from Plato to Whitehead, taught by the senior members of the Department, and then in a more specialized course in which I wrote a long essay on Anselm's ontological argument, comparing it to Karl Barth's modern appropriation of the argument. At this point in my conversion, I was persuaded that the strongest evidence for religion was supplied by

philosophical proofs for the existence of God, above all Aquinas's third way, the so-called argument from contingency, which in my mind reduced itself to the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" I'm not sure I entirely believed the ontological argument, which I now see as an obvious verbal ruse, but my paper was as much a work of advocacy as analysis. I was eager to show that proofs for God's existence were intellectually respectable—indeed, that they posed the only really serious question.

But I was not a natural philosopher. Right from the start I sensed that philosophical debate didn't suit my particular talents. I would later say that I was not smart enough to be a philosopher. As a graduate student I was delighted to come across Henry Thomas Buckle's famous put-down of the historical profession: "Any author who from indolence of thought, or from natural incapacity, is unfit to deal with the highest branches of knowledge [such as philosophy] has only to pass some years in reading a certain number of books, and then he is qualified to be an historian." I no longer subscribe to Buckle's judgment. Philosophers, I've found, are perfectly capable of being stupid, while the best historians (such as Thucydides) are masterly dialecticians. But there is a real difference in the kind of intelligence required of the historian and the philosopher. In intellectual history I would discover a discipline that allowed me to address the issues that drew me to philosophy, but without the peculiarly abstract demands I found uncongenial in philosophy.

My first history course was Yale's famous European survey, History 10, the early-modern part of which was taught by a young Reformation scholar, Charles Garside. He was a colorful and partisan lecturer. I recall that after presenting the sequential careers of Charles V (good) and Philip II (bad), he ended by intoning, "I *hate* Philip the Second." In

my junior year some of my Catholic friends and I took his undergraduate seminar on the Reformation. It was very much a kind of polemical confrontation, in which Garside defended Protestantism, while my friends and I argued the case for the Church. In terms of my developing professional identity, then, my work with Garside was a mixed blessing, since it encouraged my dogmatic tendencies even as it introduced me to a sophisticated understanding of a great episode in European history. There was, moreover, a troubling personal dimension to the relationship. Garside failed to get tenure at Yale and spent most of his career at Rice, where he was largely unproductive and suffered increasingly from ill health. He was already a heavy drinker at Yale, and on more than one occasion he showed up drunk at our dorm. I sensed at the time that he was another of those tortured souls suffering from "my problem," which he was trying to cope with through a combination of religious repression, alcohol, and inappropriate familiarity with his students. I think of him with a shudder of recognition, but also with gratitude for his having guided me, however inconsistently, toward my eventual career.

A more judicious model was supplied, ironically, by a scholar at the Yale Divinity School, Hans Frei, a German Jewish emigre who had become an Episcopal minister and a student of nineteenth-century Christology. His class on the history of Christianity, while not untouched by confessional passion, was very much a course in intellectual history. I readily identified not merely with his formidable powers of analysis but also with the wit and good humor he brought to the task. He seemed blessedly free of the anguish that troubled so many of my religious friends. He was exactly the sort of intellectual and pedagogue I hoped to become.

Three other undergraduate teachers influenced my decision to become a historian. The first was Stanley Mellon, the author of a book on the political uses of history in the Restoration, who had just come to Yale from Berkeley to teach French history. He was a compelling if idiosyncratic lecturer, who seemed to be speaking to a non-existent balcony. My religious convictions were not at stake in the story of modern France, at least not the way they were in the Reformation or the history of Christianity. So I entered into the course in a more properly historical spirit. True, I learned to hate Edmund Burke when we read the *Reflections*, an antipathy that was to stay with me the rest of my life. But the role of the Catholic Church in modern France was so odious that I had no trouble siding with the Dreyfusards or against the Action Francaise. Mellon's lectures taught me that history, far from being the mindless string of facts lamented by Henry Thomas Buckle, was in reality a sustained argument with the past: above all it was an interpretive enterprise. He also introduced me to the use of literature as a historical source: we read Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* to get a sense of the Restoration and Anatole France's *Penguin Island* to conjure up the late nineteenth century. Historical study, I found out, was intimately connected to the sorts of ideas that had attracted me to philosophy. After the class ended, Mellon took me to lunch and listened to my plans to become an intellectual historian. He was encouraging, but he urged me to keep an open mind about just what kind of historian I wanted to be. His personal attention, as well as his intellectual example, made me feel that I was already a member of the guild.

A very different kind of inspiration was provided by Leonard Krieger, Hajo Holborn's prize student, whose lectures on "The Rise of the Modern State" were a tour de force. Krieger was a surprisingly genial lecturer, bantering with the members of the

football team in the class, but the analysis he advanced was pitched at the highest level of abstraction, more like philosophy than history. My friends and I struggled to follow his intricate dialectical conception, which moved from the "structure" to the "form" and finally to the "content" of the state. It was thrilling to hear history pursued on such an elevated intellectual plane. Yet in a way it was too elevated: there was something a little bloodless about the parade of abstractions. I greatly admired Krieger's rigor, but my own brand of history, I knew, would have to be more down-to-earth. I remember buying a copy of his study *The German Idea of Freedom*, which, when I finally got around to it in graduate school, turned out to be the most difficult history book I had ever read. It was rather like reading Hegel himself.

The teacher who, more than any other, provided an example I identified with was Martin Duberman, who lived in a faculty apartment in my college and from whom I took a seminar on American history. His influence was one of manner and style rather than substance. True, I admired his intellectual radicalism, especially his effort to rescue the Abolitionists from condescension. But by this point I was exclusively interested in Europe and—as if in reaction to my obsession with "the great American novel" during high school—had decided that America was an intellectual wasteland. At the time I had no inkling that our lives were secretly linked or, of course, that nearly forty years later his autobiography, *Cures*, would become a subject of analysis in my book *Gay Lives*. He was already leading a double existence: during the week in New Haven he was a successful young scholar who brought attractive dates to the college dining hall, while on weekends in New York he was chasing boys and subjecting himself to a punishing regimen of psychoanalytic treatment to turn him into a straight man. I've already noted that I was

sensitive to the repressed homosexual inclinations of many of my Yale friends and teachers. But in Duberman's case I remained oblivious, less because my gaydar was defective than because his heterosexual disguise was so successful. He seemed remarkably self-assured, yet also modest and candid. I especially remember a conversation after his first book—a biography of Charles Francis Adams—was published. I already identified strongly with this epochal moment in the life of a scholar, and I brought along a copy of the book for him to inscribe. Yet he surprised me by speaking about how he still felt divided between a career as a historian and one as an imaginative writer—and in fact a few years later he enjoyed a great success with his play about segregation, *In White America*. Precisely the combination of analytic intelligence, unpretentiousness, and plain speaking seemed not only admirable but something that I could reasonably hope to emulate. In *Gay Lives* I give an account of our somewhat troubled relationship over the subsequent decades, when I lagged behind him in the decision to come out professionally. I am sorry to say that he was very unhappy with my analysis of *Cures*, which, in an angry three-page letter, he denounced as "ungenerous." I thought I had created a fundamentally admiring portrait, but writing about the living, I've learned, is a treacherous business.

My last year at Yale was mainly devoted to extricating myself from the Church. I was helped along by a few of my friends, who were also undergoing deconversions, notably the Holy Cross graduate writing a dissertation on Carlyle. He introduced me to two books that, a few years later, would become the subjects of my doctoral dissertation: Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* and Norman O. Brown's *Life against Death*. In them I found a fusion of psychoanalysis and radical politics that appealed to my disillusioned yet still hungry state of mind. They marked my first exposure to Freud, who,

as already noted, served as a primary guide in my escape from religion. In particular I embraced Freud's anti-philosophical prejudice, which has stayed with me ever since, though it might more readily be associated with Wittgenstein or with the Keats of Negative Capability fame: we must forgo hankering after knowledge of things that are unknowable, indeed unthinkable, such as why there is something rather than nothing. Wisdom, in this view, rests in accepting our mental limitations. Put another way, we should think about the things we *can* think about. "Whereof one cannot speak," as the man said, "thereof one must be silent."

Two other tasks occupied my senior year. The first was applying to graduate school. I can't say that I approached the job very responsibly. My Holy Cross friend had also directed me to H. Stuart Hughes's book *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought 1890-1930*, from reading parts of which I got the sense that Hughes was the sort of scholar I would like to work with. But mainly I decided to apply to Harvard (and only Harvard) because of the vague impression that it was the place to go. An even weightier motive, I fear, was that Harvard did not require the Graduate Record Exam, and I knew from my earlier experience with the SAT that I was unlikely to distinguish myself. So I made no effort to find out about other scholars—such as Carl Schorske at Berkeley—who might be appropriate mentors.

The second decision I reached was to delay graduate study for a year in order to spend time in Germany. The immediate reason was to learn German, because I found my intellectual interest increasingly drawn to German-speaking figures, like Freud and Marx. I was also tired of being a student and looked forward to spending the first year of my life since kindergarten free of academic responsibilities. There was the further consideration

that I was about to become a European historian and yet I had never been to Europe. At a deeper psychological level I felt I needed to leave the country to escape the web of Roman Catholic ties in which I had entangled myself as an undergraduate. Earlier I suggested that becoming a Catholic was mainly a defense mechanism against my homosexuality. But quitting the Church did not yet mean facing the truth about myself. I was far from ready for that, and, more important, neither were the times. Rather, I imagined my European sojourn in terms of a new personal project: I hoped that romance might bring me something of the happiness I had vainly sought in religion. So, like many young men before me, I went to Europe to fall in love. Moreover, it worked after a fashion: in Berlin I met a young woman whom I would marry two years later. Still, I have to say that, on the whole, I did a better job of learning German.

III

After the excitements—intellectual and emotional—of my undergraduate career, graduate school was a big disappointment. Above all it brought a drastic sense of intellectual reduction. Where for four years I had ranged over philosophy, literature, religion, and history in the company of both undergraduates and graduates from a variety of disciplines, I now found myself surrounded exclusively by would-be European historians, pursuing a course of study intended to qualify me for an academic job. Even without the intellectual narrowing, graduate school is probably doomed to be an unhappy experience: you are no longer in the first blush of youth, yet you remain poor and dependent, even as your former undergraduate friends enter the adult world of work and

domesticity. Harvard, moreover, seemed to pride itself on fostering a cut-throat intellectual ethos. One heard that students hid books on library reserve to keep their competitors in the dark. The atmosphere was suffused with anxiety and alienation.

My cohort of first-year Europeanists numbered about a dozen, virtually all of whom went on to distinguished professional careers, among them Elisabeth Fox (later Fox-Genovese) and Edward Shorter. Our main collective enterprise was a year-long colloquium that introduced us to some of the major issues and literature in modern European history. It was run by Stuart Hughes and Mack Walker, who, as an assistant professor and hence destined to be exiled from Harvard, was treated like a lackey by his senior colleagues. Other Department members came when their expertise was relevant to the topic. I was responsible for a presentation on the causes of World War I, which was attended by the grand old man of the Department, William Langer. He was the great authority on modern European diplomatic history, so I was flattered that he found my remarks not insensible.

Graduate school, as everyone learns, is a relatively inefficient method of education, in which much of your work seems unrelated to your supposed area of specialization. I had come to Harvard to study modern European intellectual history with Stuart Hughes, and I eventually wrote my dissertation under his direction. But I never took a seminar from him, because he didn't offer one while I was in residence. Rather, like all my classmates, I enrolled in the two European seminars being given that year, both of which, as it happened, were on topics in early-modern social history. Thus in the first semester I found myself in Franklin Ford's course on seventeenth-century cities. Ford—who had just become Dean of Arts and Sciences and taught his seminar in a University mansion on

Brattle Street—had published a book on early-modern Strasbourg. He assigned each of us a city to write about, with a view to compiling a collective portrait of European urban life in the era. I was assigned Basel, and I proceeded to write a paper on the confrontation between Basel and the encroaching French state of Louis XIV. Needless to say, it had nothing to do with modern intellectual history, indeed with any kind of intellectual history. Yet so fragile was my emerging professional identity that I began to think that I should perhaps become an early-modern social historian myself. Social history, one sensed, was the coming thing, and by sticking with intellectual history I was perhaps consigning myself to a backwater of the profession. By the middle of the semester I had moved in with two of my colleagues, Bill Beik and David Hunt, who had already decided to specialize in early-modern social history. The wave of the future seemed clear.

In the Spring, with the same cast of characters, I took Crane Brinton's seminar on eighteenth-century France. Once again, all the papers were on social topics, so I settled on a study of tax farmers. By this time I had begun to find the conceptual puzzles of early-modern history intriguing and to appreciate the high intellectual quality of the scholarship in the field. I also discovered that I was skilled at this kind of analysis: both of my seminar papers were well received. Everything seemed to be conspiring to direct me into the field.

I didn't need to make a decision about the matter until I chose a dissertation topic. The next stage of graduate training was the oral examination. Harvard required you to be examined in four fields, one of which had to be in ancient or medieval history. The rule of thumb was that you prepared a reading list of about fifty books in each field. I settled on medieval France under Charles Taylor, early-modern intellectual history under Crane Brinton, modern Germany under Fritz Ringer, and modern intellectual history under Stuart

Hughes. Virtually the entirety of my second year was devoted to this reading. I took elaborate notes and did extensive reviews. I even conducted mock exams with some of my fellow students. Yet despite my diligent preparation my performance on the orals was unimpressive. Later I heard that my fellowship was going to be reduced in favor of my classmates who had outperformed me on the orals. I felt I was in a kind of professional no-man's land.

As I recovered from the trauma of the orals, I gradually found my way back to my original idea of becoming a modern European intellectual historian. The reading I had done to prepare for Stuart Hughes's field obviously pointed me in that direction. But more important was the teaching I did at Harvard. For two years I taught in Harvard's Social Studies program. Alongside Martin Peretz—who would later become the owner of *The New Republic*—I co-led discussions of the great modern social theorists, from Tocqueville and Marx through Weber, Durkheim, and Freud. These, I found, were definitely my people. I abandoned any idea of becoming an early-modern social historian and began to look in earnest for a dissertation topic that would let me pursue my real interest in modern thought. At some point I recalled my undergraduate enthusiasm for the ideas of Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown, and, working almost entirely on my own, I managed to transform that enthusiasm into a feasible topic. In the end my graduate training turned out to be largely irrelevant to the dissertation I in fact wrote and the professional career it launched.

I have overstated the case, and I should give some credit here to Stuart Hughes's example and permissive guidance. In my essay "H. Stuart Hughes and Intellectual History" (reprinted in *Opera, Sex, and Other Vital Matters*) I have already written a tribute

to Hughes and recounted how our somewhat impersonal relationship at Harvard blossomed into genuine friendship after he moved to San Diego in the 1970s. He was not my teacher in the way that Charles Garside, Hans Frei, Stanley Mellon, and Martin Duberman had been at Yale. But his books were a singular illustration of the kind of history I wanted to write and, even more, of the kind of prose I hoped to emulate. Equally important, he provided just the right combination of indulgence and support when it came to my dissertation. He was in Europe on sabbatical when I began writing, but he responded to my chapters with letters that buoyed my confidence. I was especially flattered when he told me that he was reading the chapters to his wife, Judy. Albeit in absentia, he proved a true mentor.

The drama of my academic life in graduate school was nothing compared to the drama of my personal life in those same years. Moreover, the two dramas remain intermingled in my mind. I won't say that the struggle to become a European intellectual historian was inseparable from the struggle to become a gay man. But without question the sexual saga had its professional consequences.

During my first year at Harvard I proposed, by mail, to the young woman I had met and courted in Berlin the previous year. Ute Brosche was a lovely, sophisticated, and deeply good-hearted student of English literature at the Free University. Her English was in fact better than my German, though in the early years we spoke mainly the latter. When she accepted my proposal, I returned to Germany in the summer of 1964. We were married at the city hall in Bochum, where her family lived, and spent our honeymoon at her grandmother's home across the border from Salzburg. We then returned to the small

third-floor apartment I had rented in North Cambridge. Our daughter, Susan, was born less than two years later.

I have much to answer for in this episode. Objectively speaking, I behaved selfishly, for I knew full well that I was not firing on all cylinders. But I'm not going to beat up on myself. I was acting in good faith on the virtually universal sexual assumptions of the day. I felt I had enough heterosexual interest to make a go of the relationship, and I was certainly more attracted to Ute than any other woman I had met. Had I been born just a few years later—and the great cultural shifts of the 1960s had begun to kick in—I am certain I would have made a different decision. But, under the historical circumstances, I began my year of preparing for the oral exam as a newly-minted husband. To say that my heart was only half in it would be an exaggeration.

One fateful evening, perhaps already in the first year of our marriage, I went to a Boston Celtics game with some of my fellow grad students. As we walked from the subway to the sports arena, we passed the open front door of a bar. I was able to make out enough of the clientele to figure out instantly what kind of place it was, and I resolved to return. It was in fact Boston's most famous gay bar, Sporters. Why I was so alert to the significance of the establishment I don't know. I presume I must have received some early signals from the culture. The country was on the verge of a historic change, especially on the two coasts.

Over the next couple of years I returned to Sporters—and other such venues—repeatedly. Because I was married, I had to pick up men who would take me to their place, though sometimes we rented a hotel room. Later I occasionally took tricks to the office provided for me by the Social Studies program. I quickly learned two things. First, the

sex was just as good as I remembered from high school—and vastly better than straight sex. Second—putting together the pieces from the stories of the men I met—I saw that these men inhabited a well-established underworld of friends and lovers, a world they considered not merely a site of fleeting and guilty pick-ups but the permanent domain of their lives. I learned, in other words, that you could live as a homosexual, even though the life might be less than ideal.

For perhaps two years, as I moved from my orals to writing my dissertation, I remained in this schizophrenic world of marriage and gay infidelity. Then at the beginning of 1967 came a series of developments that drastically changed everything. The first was that I got offered a job at Stanford. I had written Stanford that I was planning to visit my Palo Alto relatives at Christmas 1966 and suggested they might want to interview me. In those days jobs were not advertised, but I knew through the grapevine that Stanford was looking for a modern intellectual historian. In fact they had already offered the job to several candidates, who for one reason or another had not panned out. The "hiring process" was nothing like what it has become. I had a chat with various senior members of the Department and was taken to lunch. I gave no job talk and met no graduate students. At one moment I was left alone in the chairman's office, where the letters from my Harvard professors were strewn on the table (I peeked). I suspect that Stuart Hughes's recommendation carried special weight. Several members of the Department had served with him in the OSS, and he had taught at Stanford in the 1950s. A few weeks later I got the offer.

So I knew that I would be moving to California in the fall of 1967. Then the inevitable happened: in February of 1967 I met a man in Sporters with whom I rather

quickly fell in love. Practically overnight, and with surprisingly little anguish, I decided I wanted to live with him. Although radical and with profound implications (for several parties), the decision seemed almost easy: what I felt for him was categorically more intense than anything I had felt for my wife (or any other woman). Indeed, not to act on the feeling, I thought, would be almost stupid. So in a matter of weeks I made the necessary decisions and spoke to the necessary people, and before the end of March I had moved into my boyfriend's Beacon Hill apartment. The nation was still two years shy of Stonewall, but clearly the logic of Gay Liberation had begun to reach me.

The hardest part of course was telling my wife. She had left her native Germany to come live with me and had patiently endured the deprivations of graduate student life for nearly three years. More important, we had a one-year-old child. Since I had got the Stanford job, she thought the family was about to move to California and properly begin our grown-up life. I think she may have had some inkling of what was amiss. But she was still shocked and angry. Nevertheless she agreed to a divorce, which committed me to pay about half my Stanford salary in alimony and child-support. We would suffer a few rough years, until she married another academic, who turned out to be a superb father to our daughter. But her liberality and fair-mindedness guaranteed that she would ultimately welcome me back into her life, and even after Susan had grown up we remained in close touch. In April 2006, some forty-two years after our marriage, she suffered a fatal heart attack. In one of our last conversations she told me she thought of me not as her former husband but simply as an old friend. It is an unsettling experience for a gay man to find himself suddenly widowed.

Telling my family was less daunting. I began with my brother, who was broadminded and affectionate and who of course gained a certain moral authority as the last standing straight man in the family. I relied on him to convey the news to our mother. I knew she would be unhappy, if only because she was very fond of my wife. And, indeed, she was in a funk for a few weeks before she succumbed to the family's almost congenital liberalism. The truth is, I had a very easy time of it, at least compared to the typical gay man coming out in the 1960s. Since I was the official family genius and was about to get a Ph.D., everyone seemed to assume I must know what I was doing.

Finally, I had to deal with Stanford. Not that I planned to tell my future colleagues the truth. On the contrary, from the start I adopted a policy of "out at home and closeted at work." But my new boyfriend, who was still in school in Boston, was reluctant to pick up sticks and move to California. So I called David Potter, the Department chairman, told him I was getting divorced, and asked if I could delay my appointment for a year. He said he sympathized and made reference to his own divorce (which had in fact prompted him to leave Yale for Stanford), but he insisted that I must take up my duties in the fall. So in the few months remaining before I was to depart for California, I had to negotiate my divorce, persuade my boyfriend to come with me to San Francisco, and find a place there for him to finish school. In my giddy romantic abandon nothing seemed impossible. Somehow I also managed to finish all but the last chapter of my dissertation, which I remember typing at the dining table in our one-room apartment. Throughout this frenetic period I was deliriously happy.

IV

I have a vivid recollection of the important events of my high-school, college, and graduate student years, and I have little trouble locating those events in place and time. Just the opposite is the case with my now forty years as an academic. Academic life is profoundly repetitive: one writes books and teaches courses. In memory it all becomes a blur. I can still recall what might be considered "outside" events, such as my liver transplant, which occurred in 1988 and about which I've published an essay ("My Afterlife"). But the work you do writing a book or teaching a course is indistinguishable from the work on another book or course. Your life gradually turns into your bibliography: you become a list of publications more than a living, breathing actor. That's why most academic autobiographies are so uninteresting. If you want to make something readable of an academic life, the proper vehicle is the novel, where personal animosities and power struggles, rather than books and courses, can take center stage.

I lived in San Francisco my first two decades at Stanford. I thereby created a 35-mile cordon sanitaire between my public and my private life. I had given up driving when I returned from Europe and no longer even had a license. So two or three times a week, at 7:00 in the morning, I took a charter bus from North Beach that brought me to the campus at 8:00. Living in San Francisco had a profound impact on my thinking. The city already had a substantial gay population when I arrived in 1967. But over the next two decades the numbers increased exponentially, and along with them the visibility of gay economic, cultural, and finally political institutions. Restaurants, bars, and bathhouses proliferated, the Castro was invented, a gay man was elected Supervisor (and subsequently murdered),

and, in the1980s, the AIDS epidemic began. The psychological effects of living day in and day out in such a place were incalculable. Above all, it provided me with a deep sense of comfort and belonging. The personal confidence I derived from living in San Francisco fed inexorably into my confidence as a scholar and teacher. It also influenced the subjects I chose to write about, at first only implicitly, but then ever more directly.

I loved Stanford from the start. To my surprise I found I was especially drawn to my senior colleagues, men (there were no women) a generation older than I. The younger members of the Department were nearly all social historians. We shared leftist politics, but they disapproved of my interest in the history of ideas, which, while not as regressive as diplomatic or military history, was nonetheless elitist in their view. By way of contrast, several of my older colleagues—notably Gordon Craig, Gordon Wright, and David Potter—were not merely accomplished scholars but highly cultivated individuals who knew a great deal about literature, art, and ideas. I felt a natural affinity with them, even though they had no particular interest in the figures, like Freud and his disciples, I was writing about. They were also more amusing companions than my earnest but generally humorless contemporaries. It did not hurt that many of these older men—like our Eastern European historian, Wayne Vucinich, and our Latin Americanist, John Johnson—were fond of me and invited me into their homes. They were perhaps tired of being patronized by the younger generation and found me a less critical spirit. Uncharitably, you could say that I had already become an old boy. One of the great sadnesses of the past decade has been watching this older generation die off. The last to go—and the one I felt closest to—was Gordon Craig, whom I visited every week in the "health center" where he spent the last year and a half of his life. He remained proud and funny to the end.

I am often asked what it was like being a gay faculty member at Stanford, especially in the early years. Technically I remained closeted at school until 1982, when *Salmagundi* published a correspondence I had with a gay undergraduate ("Dear Paul"—also reprinted in *Opera, Sex, and Other Vital Matters*). During that first decade and a half I felt I had a tacit agreement with my Stanford colleagues. They knew I was living with a man in San Francisco, and some of the younger ones even visited occasionally. I had to endure a certain amount of routine heterosexual chatter, but I never felt obliged to ogle the girls or talk about my romantic life. In other words, my senior colleagues treated me with considerable tact. At no time did I fear that my sexuality posed a threat to my professional advancement. Still, in retrospect I feel I should have come out sooner and more forcibly than I did. I now fully subscribe to the proposition that the closet is a form of self-imposed tutelage and that teachers have a particular obligation to quit it. But ambition and a certain faintheartedness persuaded me to keep my San Francisco and Stanford lives hermetically sealed until well after I had received tenure.

In my scholarship I have followed the principle that you should write about things that really matter to you. Writing is such a precarious undertaking that only genuine passion can sustain you through the long, lonely years it takes to produce a book, and even then the process is hedged about with anxiety and the possibility of failure. More than once, even when past the midway point of composition, I've been overwhelmed by the sense that my "text" was just one damn thing after another. Because I have always picked topics I hoped would sustain my enthusiasm, my writings have not added up to an easily identifiable scholarly profile. I think of myself as a European intellectual historian—and

my meat-and-potatoes courses at Stanford have been about the history of thought since the Enlightenment—but I am sometimes identified as a psychoanalyst, sometimes as a sexologist, and sometimes as a historian of music. In my own mind my books are in fact united by certain common themes and assumptions. Over nearly four decades of writing, as I see it, I have had three great subjects: Freud, sex, and opera. All of them are grounded in the experiences of my early life, and at some level of my imagination they are all connected.

Freud has been my most conventional subject. He is after all a canonical figure in Western intellectual history. In this sense my interest in him is no different from my interest in other profoundly original and influential thinkers, like Marx and Darwin. Actually I have written less on Freud himself than on his interpreters and critics. In my dissertation—which with only minor changes became my first book, *The Freudian Left* (1969)—I addressed what I saw as the central issue in interpreting Freud as a social thinker or social philosopher. This Freud appeared to be a profoundly gloomy diagnostician of the human predicament, a man who argued that humanity must learn to live with an ever growing burden of sexual repression and hatred—Freud, if you will, as a kind of anti-Marx.

I felt instinctively that this view was wrong, or at least incomplete, and I set about to expound the ideas of three thinkers who disputed the consensus that psychoanalysis was fundamentally conservative—who insisted, on the contrary, that with a certain amount of intellectual tinkering one could find a way out of the pessimistic conclusions to which Freud's ideas seemed to lead. It was, I hardly need add, a project undertaken very much in

the spirit of the 1960s—my modest contribution to the counterculture—and, however indirectly, it allowed me to register a protest against the reigning sexual dispensation.

The central inspiration for this project was Herbert Marcuse's book *Eros and Civilization*, to which the culminating chapter of *The Freudian Left* was devoted. But I preceded my treatment of Marcuse with an analysis of two earlier thinkers, Wilhelm Reich and Geza Roheim, who had anticipated Marcuse's revolutionary interpretation of Freud. Marcuse focused on what Freud himself called "genital tyranny," the way in which over the course of development the child's originally anarchic sexual impulses get subordinated to the genitals. He argued that Freud had wrongly seen this process as a biological inevitability and that we must strive to reverse the process and restore the body to its original "polymorphous perversity." The feature of Marcuse's analysis I found most intriguing was that he expressly presented the homosexual as a kind of psychological hero—a figure that had resisted the repressive regime of genital tyranny. How thrilling that a book published in America at the height of the homophobic 1950s should make the homosexual its psychological protagonist!

In *The Freudian Left* I hit upon a formal device that was to prove useful to me several times again in the future. The book consists of a triptych, the portraits of three thinkers who, taken together, constitute an intellectual tradition. The virtue of the device was that it allowed me to tell the story of an evolving tradition but to devote most of my energy to what I do best as a scholar, namely, the close reading of individual texts. If I am absolutely honest, however, I will have to confess that I fell into the triptych accidentally. I had finished my chapters on Wilhelm Reich and Geza Roheim when, in March of my first year at Stanford, I got a letter from Stuart Hughes saying he expected the rest of the

dissertation by May, in time for me to get my degree. I had intended to compose two further portraits, one of Marcuse and the other of Norman O. Brown, who advanced a very similar interpretation of Freud in *Life against Death*. But in order to finish by May I decided I would have to reduce my discussion of Brown to a few pages within the Marcuse chapter. Thus did my planned four-part dissertation suddenly become a triptych. I somehow managed to complete the chapter on time, even though I was in the middle of inventing the lectures for my course on European thought. I have repressed all memory of what must have been the most unrelenting period of intellectual labor in my life—much of it, ironically, devoted to the proposition that we can look forward to a future of enhanced sexual freedom.

I always say you have to have luck with books. In the case of *The Freudian Left* I had better luck than I would enjoy with any other book. When I began the dissertation, Marcuse was an obscure professor of philosophy at Brandeis. He was an old friend of Stuart Hughes's (from OSS days) and a teacher of my fellow Harvard instructor Martin Peretz, and through Hughes and Peretz I got an interview with him. I found him a delightful man, with a splendidly dirty mouth. When, however, in the summer of 1968 he was attacked by the American Legion and reactionary congressmen and actually forced into hiding, he became, virtually overnight, a celebrity—"the philosopher of the New Left." Suddenly, and through no virtue of my own, I had a publishable book on my hands. Stuart Hughes put me in touch with his editor at Harper and Row, and within a year they published the dissertation virtually unchanged. The book came out in paperback almost immediately and sold over 20,000 copies. I can even boast that my coinage "the Freudian left" entered the discourse of the period. Significantly the book contains no dedication. In

my own mind I had dedicated it to my lover (to use the term we all preferred in those days), and I even entertained the naïve idea that my omission would invite such an interpretation. It was a quintessentially closeted gesture. On the back of the jacket was a large photo of me taken at his family home in Boston.

I returned to Freud over two decades later in another intellectual triptych, only this time my three thinkers were not friendly interpreters seeking to give Freud a more progressive reading but three critics out to show that Freud was dishonest, cowardly, or simply wrong. *The Freudian Left* appeared in the twilight of Freud's mid-century American ascendancy. By the time *Freud and His Critics* appeared in 1993, Freud had suffered over a decade of unrelenting attacks on his character and ideas, and his reputation was in serious decline. Partly out of loyalty to him but also in order to weigh in on the current debates, I examined the writings of what I considered his three most impressive critics, the sociobiologist Frank Sulloway, the Sanskrit scholar and intellectual gadfly Jeffrey Masson, and the philosopher Adolf Grunbaum. My book provided a close reading of these critics with a view to showing where their arguments lacked cogency or their evidence was unpersuasive. It was necessarily a somewhat scholastic enterprise, though it won substantial praise from Freud's intellectual friends, like Peter Gay. Unaddressed in the book, but lurking on the margins, was the figure of Frederick Crews, whose scathing criticism of Freud was often on my mind. I've continued to teach Freud and occasionally write about him in the years since *Freud and His Critics*, and I've not lost my enthusiasm for him. As I said to Fred Crews when we rode in the same bus after a conference at Yale in 1998, you can't read Freud without falling in love all over again. And of course no one willingly gives up the intellectual heroes of his youth.

I said that sex was my second great subject, but then writing about Freud is already writing about sex. Still, I have managed to make the history of sexual thought, independent of Freud, the subject of three books. In *The Modernization of Sex* (1976) my goal was to show how the distinctively modern way of thinking about sex had developed. Again I settled on three figures: Havelock Ellis, Alfred Kinsey, and William Masters and Virginia Johnson. They represented a logical progression in both method and ideas. Havelock Ellis derived his ideas largely from his correspondents, whose sexual stories were often presented verbatim in the appendices to his volumes. I was especially interested in his study of homosexuality, *Sexual Inversion*, which made the case that homosexuality was not a crime but a congenital disorder. We are now inclined to complain about the "medicalization" of homosexuality in figures like Ellis, but he viewed the shift from a moral to a medical understanding as progressive and humane. Alfred Kinsey's two monumental volumes of the mid-century are based not on correspondents but on the interviews he and his associates conducted with thousands of subjects. He used his findings to disabuse his readers of their conservative sexual assumptions, showing that Americans led much more varied sexual lives—including a good deal more homosexuality—than allowed for in our official sexual ideology. For their part, Masters and Johnson carried the modern sexual tradition to its logical conclusion: for Kinsey's interviews they substituted the direct observation of human sexual behavior in the laboratory. Curiously, however, their sexual ideas were more conventional than Kinsey's. True, they advanced the cause of feminism by proving there was no such thing as a vaginal

orgasm. But their conception of ideal sexual relations remained uncritically heterosexual, even marital. Unlike Kinsey, they were not the gay man's friend.

The Modernization of Sex, in contrast to *The Freudian Left*, was not a lucky book. It appeared in the same year as the English translation of Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*. Imprudently, I wrote a hostile review of Foucault in *The New Republic*, suggesting that my own book was a more reliable guide to the history of sexual opinion than his. I was probably justified in my empirical criticisms, but I woefully failed to appreciate Foucault's conceptual power and originality. I have spent years trying to make amends, especially in my teaching. In any event, Foucault's book fully—and I'm inclined now to say rightly—eclipsed mine. Where my first book had caught a wave of the Zeitgeist, my second seemed curiously out of tune with the times.

In the past decade homosexuality has become the direct and fulltime subject of my writing, as opposed to the implicit and often glancing subject it was in my earlier books. *Gay Lives: Homosexual Autobiography from John Addington Symonds to Paul Monette* (1999) is a study of fourteen autobiographers, all of them intellectuals and artists. The book aims to show how the gay autobiographical tradition has evolved since the late nineteenth century. It is much longer than any of my other books, and with fourteen subjects it might seem to mark a break with my tried-and-true formula of examining thinkers in groups of three. But in fact the tripartite structure can still be detected in the book's organization: it sets six British autobiographers against three from France and five from America.

Gay Lives inspired me to create a Stanford undergraduate seminar on gay autobiography, which I have taught every year but one since 2000. It has been a revealing

experience, as well as an entertaining one. We read nine autobiographies by gay men and women—and the occasional transsexual—and at the end the students write their own autobiographical essay. When I first taught the course it was taken exclusively by Gay Men and the Women Who Love Them (to borrow a phrase from the *New Yorker*'s Nancy Franklin). But over the years the constituency has changed in a heartwarming way: I now often have straight men in the course. They take it for what I would call political reasons: as progressives, they feel a kind of obligation to inform themselves about this particular form of oppression. Clearly the world has changed when twenty-year-old heterosexuals no longer feel any embarrassment about enrolling in such a course. True, Stanford is not Oklahoma, but I nonetheless take it as evidence that homophobia is in trouble, perhaps fatally so.

I followed up *Gay Lives* with a book on gay conservatives, *Queer Wars: The New Gay Right and Its Critics* (2005). In it I argue that the emergence of gay conservatism is the most striking recent development in the gay world—and a measure of the extent to which gays have been assimilated into mainstream society. *Queer Wars* focuses on four conservative intellectuals, the most prominent of whom is Andrew Sullivan. I show how these thinkers have broken with the central doctrines of the Gay Liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Not surprisingly, they have been outspoken champions of gay marriage, which they have succeeded in making into the main gay issue of our time. *Queer Wars* also examines the critics of these conservatives—figures, like the literary scholar Michael Warner, who regret their betrayal of the movement's historic commitment to progressive politics, gender liberation, and sexual fulfillment.

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Finally, opera. I am convinced that my writings on opera and its relation to intellectual history represent my most important and potentially enduring contribution. What pleases me most about them is the level of passion they achieve, something difficult to do in academic writing. My interest began to shift from orchestral music to opera at Yale. The shift was effected mainly by listening to recordings and to the Saturday afternoon broadcasts from the Met. Moving to San Francisco only increased my interest, and by 1970, despite my poverty, I had bought a subscription to the San Francisco Opera, where I saw around ten productions a year. As the decade progressed I became ever more persuaded that the works I was hearing on the San Francisco stage engaged the same issues I was teaching in my lecture courses on European thought at Stanford: opera, I concluded, was a constituent of intellectual history, just as was the history of painting or the history of the novel.

For a while I thought I would pursue this insight by writing a book on Verdi, who is the central composer in the operatic canon and whose music I found especially beguiling. I actually managed to write a substantial piece of my Verdi study before giving up on it and converting the results into a chapter of a very different book on opera. I figured out I wanted to write something similar to Joseph Kerman's *Opera* As *Drama*, which I still consider the best opera book I've read: Kerman assesses a handful of operatic masterpieces against the classical (Aristotelian) standards of drama. Only, in my book, the point of reference would be not drama but the history of ideas. I eventually settled on eight works, from Mozart to Strauss, that I related to the major developments in European thought from the Enlightenment to modernism. In each case my argument was based not on the libretto but on the music. I fully accepted Joseph Kerman's dictum that in opera the

composer is the dramatist: ideas that do not find musical expression for all practical purposes cease to exist.

Opera and Ideas: From Mozart to Strauss appeared in 1985 and was the subject of a front-page review in the *New York Times Book Review*. It won several prizes and, in its paperback edition, quickly went through three printings. To my surprise it was received sympathetically by the musicological community, which I had feared would view me as a crass interloper. Happily, a younger generation of "new" musicologists, eager to liberate the discipline from its hermetic habits, embraced me as an ally in their campaign to link music to the wider intellectual world. *Opera and Ideas*, in other words, was another lucky book. As I've already intimated, its main strength lies not in the particular hypothesis it advances about opera and the history of thought but in the passion it manages to convey about the works it treats. No comment on the book pleased me more than one reviewer's observation that it was "white hot."

I should not leave the impression that my interest in opera is exclusively or even primarily intellectual. Much of what attracts me to opera is the same stuff that earlier attracted me to instrumental music: it is ultimately unanalyzable but has to do with such structural features as melody, harmony, form, and instrumental timbre. But the primary seduction of opera for me, as for most opera lovers, is still the human voice. If you are not charmed by operatic singing, you will never become devoted to the genre. Perhaps it is an intellectual embarrassment, but I have spent countless hours listening to voices. In the case of certain singers—Martinelli, Callas, Bjoerling, Janowitz—I've come to know the historical trajectory of their vocal evolution so precisely that I can judge within a matter of a year or two when particular recordings were made.

Occasionally, though not often, my musical interest has strayed beyond opera. In the last couple of years I have become fascinated by the singer and songwriter Rufus Wainwright. Partly he has attracted my attention because he is a gay man who writes about his romantic life. I first heard him singing his song "The Maker Makes" over the credits for *Brokeback Mountain*. I find the voice itself mesmerizing: it is not operatic, but it is large, wide-ranging, and distinctive, and it boasts exceptional breath control and legato. "The Maker Makes" led me to his CDs, in which I discovered a melodic gift comparable to Schubert's. Wainwright admits to having been influenced by opera, especially Verdi, and he has in fact been invited by the Met to compose an opera for the house. He recently filled Carnegie Hall on two evenings during which he recreated, song for song, Judy Garland's famous Carnegie Hall concert of 1961. I have called him (in print) the greatest gay composer of the twenty-first century, heir to Benjamin Britten in the twentieth century and Tchaikovsky in the nineteenth. He is still only in his thirties (and the century itself is young), so my pronouncement is doubtless premature. But at some barely conscious level I have been profoundly affected by the union in his art of operatic and gay sensibilities.

I don't want to end this discussion of the books I've written without saying something about writing itself. From the beginning I've been intensely conscious of wishing to write a certain kind of prose, of which clarity, economy, and elegance are the primary characteristics. I think of it as the plain style. Its bible is Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*—a book I have recommended to generations of students—and it is embodied for me in a handful of writers I've taken as models, among them George Orwell, Lionel Trilling, and Freud. I've tried not to be dogmatic about the matter, and over the

past few decades, as a more difficult and opaque language has invaded the academy, I've been prepared to allow that intellectual complexity sometimes requires a more complex literary manner. I also worry that in my own writing I have been more concerned about good sentences than good ideas. I spend as much time correcting and pruning as I do producing the original draft. My obsession with the plain style, I should add, does not extend to literature. On the contrary, my favorite novelist is Proust, to whom I have become ever more addicted as I've grown older and about whom I would someday like to write a book. If I do, however, it too will be in the plain style.

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I began by raising doubts about my identity as a historian. I've noticed that, in comparison to my departmental colleagues, I have a much less proprietary sense about the discipline and about my subdiscipline within it. I do not worry about whether, when I retire, Stanford will replace me with another European intellectual historian. To be sure, I teach my graduate students about the history of the field, and I have closely followed the careers of its major practitioners: Stuart Hughes, Carl Schorske, and Peter Gay in the previous generation, Robert Darnton, Dominick LaCapra, and Martin Jay in my own. But perhaps because much of my writing has fallen outside the mainstream of European intellectual history (sex and opera have hardly been its central concerns), my narcissistic investment in the field has been relatively modest. And, in any event, disciplines and subdisciplines are ephemeral conventions. To set too much psychological store by their fate would be imprudent.

In the last chapter of *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf writes, "The truth is, I often like women." I want to echo her, despite the reservations I've expressed: I often like historians, and on the whole I am happy to have spent an intellectual career among them. Perhaps I would have been equally happy in other disciplines—like music or literature—in no small part because I enjoy the routines of academic life. Being a professor is the best imaginable job: you have no boss, you largely control your own time, you work on what interests you, and, not least, you get to spend a lifetime around attractive and eager young people. I find even the bureaucratic routines of the academy diverting: hiring and promoting, admitting graduate students, electing chairmen. About the only thing I dread is discussing "curricular reform."

Still, I admire historians and feel comfortable with them. What I admire most is their intellectual modesty and lack of pretension. The quality reveals itself in a number of ways. It is most obvious in their preference for the plain style, which guarantees that their work can be read beyond the confines of the profession. I also admire their respect for evidence: historians have an instinctive aversion to the categorical and unsupported pronouncements that often mar literary scholarship. A corollary of the respect for evidence is their healthy suspicion of abstraction. Finally, living among historians has the inestimable advantage of serving as an antidote to what I call "the provincialism of the modern." Most of us study things that, from the point of view of world history, happened yesterday and largely in our own backyards. Having colleagues who know about seventeenth-century Russia or ancient China serves as a corrective to this modern myopia. The pervasive spirit of the discipline is cosmopolitan and democratic.

History, then, has provided me with an accommodating home for my labors. Its ecumenical spirit has indulged my rather idiosyncratic passions. Its unpretentious intellectual manners have suited my own preference for clear argument and plain speaking. And the prevailing collegiality of its adepts—certainly at Stanford—has made "going to work" a highly agreeable experience for the past forty years.

Maybe I am a historian after all.

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