2. 'Introduction' from *Essais d'Ego-Histoire*

Pierre Nora

Translated by Stephen Muecke

With this volume, Gallimard's *Bibliothèque des Histoires* collection has produced a different kind of book. It is not the product of an investigation; it is more a laboratory experiment in which historians attempt to turn themselves into historians. These are documents, which will be treated as such by future historians, but documents also at one remove; not those that historians normally use, but ones which, for once, they have agreed to write about themselves. These essays can, and should, be read as they were written, independently of each other. But their writing, which has responded to a pressing need, and their collection here are, above all, contributing to the development of a genre: ego-history, a new genre for a new period of historical consciousness.

It begins at the crossroads of two important movements. The first starts by undermining the classical foundations of historical objectivity, the other by investing the historical gaze with the present.

For a century now, the scientific tradition as a whole has forced historians to absent themselves from the scene of their work, to hide their personalities behind their knowledge, to set up barricades with file notes, to run away to some other period, to only express themselves through others. The self is only briefly authorised in the thesis dedication or in the preface to a book. For the last 20 years, historiography has shown up the pretenses of this impersonality and how its guarantees lie on shaky ground. Historians today are, unlike their predecessors, ready to admit there is a close and quite intimate link between themselves and their work. No one is unaware that spelling out one's involvement with the material offers a better protection than vain protests about objectivity. The stumbling block thus turns into an advantage. The unveiling and analysis of existential involvement, rather than moving away from some impartial investigation, becomes instead an instrument for improving understanding.

The same body of traditions feed into a robust mistrust of a contemporary history which is still too recent to deserve any positive assessment. The way in which historians have conquered their own century, or even their present time, is one of the advances the discipline has made in recent decades. It has shown that supposedly prohibitive obstacles have been overcome, and that an

historical understanding of the present was not only possible, but necessary. If we follow the line of this critical retreat from what is close at hand, should we not all be drawn into seeing ourselves, and most of all the historian, as objects of inquiry twice over?

This situation led us to ask a group of historians to attempt the experiment that we felt was virtually happening around us.¹ It was essential that they be well known to the public through their books, they had to be writing in enough different idioms to assure the representativeness of the discipline, and they should not have already done a similar job on their own account. Many would not take it on for personal reasons, though without ever denying the methodological interest of the proposal. So I am all the more grateful to Maurice Agulhon, Pierre Chaunu, Georges Duby, Raoul Girardet, Jacques Le Goff, Michelle Perrot and René Rémond for having taken the plunge, well aware of what they were in for and the risks involved. Should someone blurt out their surprise in the face of all this exhibitionism, the complaints should be directed only to the instigator, who was motivated by perfectly disinterested personal curiosity, and who set out the rules of the game.

These are not phony literary autobiographies, pointless intimate confessions, abstract professions of faith, or attempts at basic psychoanalysis. The exercise was to clearly set down one's own story [*histoire*] as one would write someone else's; to try to apply to oneself, each with his or her own particular style and methods, the same cool, encompassing and explanatory gaze that one so often directs towards others. The idea was to explain, as an historian, the link between the history you have made and the history that has made you.

Now, over to the reader to decide how the results bring newness to the tried and true genres, in terms of personal memory and of deepening our understanding of the times.

1 The prototype was provided by Philippe Ariès in *Un Historien du Dimanche* (Editions du Seuil, 1980), a work prefigured by Michel Winock, who told the story of two important years for him in *La République se Meurt* (Editions du Seuil, 1978). This was followed by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, with *Paris-Montpellier, P.C.-P.S.U., 1945-1963*, (Gallimard, in the *Témoins* series, 1982). The genre starts up again, here and there. We could note, in particular, Pierre Goubert, 'Naissance d'un Historien: Hazards et racines', the preface to *La France d'Ancien Régime* (Mélanges Pierre Goubert, 1984), as well as 'L'Image dans le Tapis', an autobiographical introduction very close to ego-histoire that Mona Ozouf offered in *l'Ecole de la France*, (Gallimard, 1984), or, in completely opposite idioms, Ernest Labrousse, 'Entretiens Avec Christophe Charle', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, April-June 1980, No. 32-33, and Georges Dumezil's *Entretiens*, with Didier Eribon (Gallimard, 1987), as well as the memoirs of Alain Besançon, *Une Génération*, (Julliard, 1987).

This text taken from *Ngapartji Ngapartji: In turn in turn:*

Ego-histoire, Europe and Indigenous Australia

Edited by Vanessa Castejon, Anna Cole, Oliver Haag and Karen Hughes,
published 2014 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.