

## Writing Conservation or, the Conservator As Author

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Disciplinization is linked to writing. Most of the time we are oblivious to this because writing itself has become a mere vehicle for content and argument and, thus, invisible. The transparent “container” best serves the clear analysis of information and the cut-and-thrust of intellectual advancement.

The easiest way to make this argument would be to point to the campaign of the Royal Society in mid-seventeenth-century England. “Nullius in verba” was their motto—“take no one’s word for it.”<sup>1</sup> They juxtaposed action and image to words, but since words were inevitable, and images always needed explanation, what they really meant was something more like “no verbal finery.” And in this, as Quentin Skinner has argued, they were following the legacy of Thomas Hobbes. And so do we.

While brought up on classical rhetoric, and having translated Thucydides’s Greek history and served as Francis Bacon’s Latin secretary, by the late 1630s Hobbes had broken with this tradition and “the Renaissance ideal of a union between reason and rhetoric, and hence between science and eloquence.”<sup>2</sup> He distinguished between the arts of persuasion and education and then argued that “the procedures of all the genuine sciences, serve in themselves to dictate the acceptance of the truths they find out.” In other words, science proves itself. We can see this as the foundation of what the Royal Society made their own—though by then Hobbes had pivoted 180 degrees on the question of rhetoric and was no friend of the Royal Society.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, among the humanists there were the antiquarians, who did “research,” identifying, collecting—sometimes by excavating—and interpreting sources while paying little attention to literary art, and there were historians who were masters of style, rewriting the transmitted facts of ancient history according to the intellectual needs of their own time. In a caricatural dichotomy around 1600, the antiquaries were the ones who cared about things; the historians, words.

By 1750 things were very different—clarity and scientific writing had become dominant. (Along the way, historians learned to use sources and at the same time at least some of them parlayed their literary skills into a sought-after wider readership.) By 1850 things were clearer still: Herman von Helmholtz’s 1853 address to the Goethe Society insisted that poetic language—referring specifically to Goethe’s natural philosophy and natural history—wasn’t fit for scientific inquiry. The natural sciences, he argued, required a way of writing pruned of its own subjectivity.<sup>4</sup>

Those envious of the authoritative status being acquired by natural sciences sought to adopt the outward, objectivized form of a science. Even those defending the autonomy of the human sciences did not do so by forging ever-more idiosyncratic, or poetic, forms. On the contrary, whether in the historical or philosophical sciences—think of Wilhelm Dilthey, who straddled both, or Max Weber—writing became less subjective in order to seem more objective. More like the natural sciences.

Conservation as a field of thinking and practice developed at just this time. Unsurprisingly, it followed this pattern: emphasizing authoritativeness by aping the natural sciences, de-emphasizing subjectivity—and subjective decision-making—by adopting a form of presentation that implied objectivity. In the museum environment, when conservators are brought into publications—and this is now, fortunately, more common, tracking the rising importance of conservation—they are typically providing technical analyses, where the graphs, diagrams, microscopy, and X-ray photography do the talking. Indeed, as methods from the natural sciences have been put to work more and more for the study of objects, it has been less about adopting the manner of scientific writing than becoming simply another branch of natural-scientific writing, whether chemistry or physics or materials science.

With greater visibility and acknowledged cultural importance than ever before, and with this likely only to increase with the depredations of climate change in our future, we are in a position to ask a new question: What might it mean for conservation as a field to revisit the work of writing? In 1988, Clifford Geertz published a book of his essays titled *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. What would it say about conservation if there could be a book titled *The Conservator as Author*?

The thrust of Geertz's volume, conveyed by its introductory chapter, "Being There: Anthropology and the Scene of Writing," is that the view of the ethnographer as a neutral observer—or transparent container—going out there and bringing "it" back, like that of the historian retrieving an existing but forgotten story, is based on the belief in "universal history." Dropping it means confronting the failure of anthropology by writing. In anthropological texts, as in historical ones, narrative and argument are hopelessly intertwined.<sup>5</sup> Yet, Geertz argued, fear of being called subjective, and thus nonscientific, has got in the way of exploring the personality of the best ethnographic work and led people to opt for a bland and ultimately fatuous objectivity instead of owning the inevitable situatedness of the observer.<sup>6</sup> We could see this as the legacy of Weber's notion of "value interpretation," which was his way of upholding the legitimacy of the cultural sciences as sciences in a hostile environment.<sup>7</sup> Against this, Geertz wagered the person of the anthropologist as expressed in writerliness.

I am proposing that conservators follow Geertz into the labyrinth of disciplinary self-fashioning through writing. His study of anthropology, making us pay attention to the work of writing, can be a model for us, thinking here about what writing could do for conservation as a field. If, elsewhere, I have stressed the close relationship between the conservator and the historian—more specifically, the conservator as historian of the object, the historian as conservator of the past—here we follow Geertz's nod to ethnography: the conservator as "the ethnographer of the object" with all that might entail. After considering the question of writing conservation, we will conclude by outlining some of the implications of this drawing near of conservation and ethnography. Why do we need to have this conversation now? Just as Geertz's essay reflected a sense of crisis and opportunity within the discipline of anthropology, the turn to writing conservation comes at what we believe to be a turning point in the history of conservation. The coming climate catastrophe will make conservation-preservation-restoration a page-one concern all over the world, with billions of dollars and lives, as well as intangible cultural heritage, at stake. If the push is coming from without, the "pull" is from within: there is an opportunity for conservators now of the sort that we haven't seen in our lifetimes and probably not in the whole short history of

conservation. From out of the hidden spaces of museum basements and off-site studios, conservators' work now happens in public view and is celebrated in public places. The impact of spectacularization on museum-going, itself a phenomenon of the last decades, has made the "how to" of conservation knowledge in action something that can be offered to visitors seeking an experience. And then, from outside the museum, the wider interest in things and material culture has created an entirely new opportunity for conservators to find a place in the university curriculum. The prospect of conservators with PhDs in history or art history—thus far the vast majority with PhDs are in the natural sciences and work as conservation, or cultural heritage, scientists—opens up the possibility of conservation developing new forms of address appropriate to these new audiences.

This most recent "material turn" of ours—I have elsewhere commented on the fact that these have occurred over and over since the fifteenth century—could with only slight exaggeration be linked to the publication in 1986 of Arjun Appadurai's collection *The Social Life of Things*, and within it, Igor Kopytoff's "The Cultural Biography of Things." Who better to write about the social lives of things and the biographies of objects than conservators? But it didn't happen. The archaeologists took up the challenge with social archaeology in the 1990s; the conservators' time has now come. Writing conservation as an initiative is about reintroducing this mix of topics as seen through the hands and eyes of conservators.

Let's start with the kind of writing conservators do now. By far the largest amount is invisible to the naked eye: the treatment report. Here, conservators write about objects for other conservator-readers of the future. They describe what they see, what their instruments report, and what was done to the objects before the objects entered their care. While vaguely historical, they contain no agency; while written by a person, they often name no names; while discussing objects made by humans and cared for by humans, they avoid storytelling. In this, they exemplify the anonymity of objectivity. The far smaller amount of conservation writing, though larger in quantity at the present moment than ever before, is the catalogue essay devoted to technical analysis of an exhibited, or elsewhere discussed, object. Whether these appear in the back of the book, as is the norm, or up front, with the art historical chapters, as is less common, the conservator's writing aspires to the objective, or scientific, style. These texts are generally festooned with graphs, charts, and instrument-generated imaging.

I would argue that the treatment report, the "dark matter" of conservation writing, is probably most responsible for shaping the literary self-image of the conservator as self-effacing. How might we think about ways conservators could write about objects that don't only acknowledge their positionality—that is, who they are, how they were trained, where they work, what the audience is for their writing—but also broaden the remit of what they, as conservators, feel licensed to talk about?

One way, which has roots deep in the literature of art and art history and is consistent with the training and mission of conservators, is *ekphrasis*, the description of the work of art. How might we reimagine this genre in the hands of a conservator? Jim Coddington's essay for this publication offers a peek into this future. It is, ostensibly, the description of a treatment. We learn about what he is doing (removing varnish), how he is doing it (with a swab and a solvent both plucked from the adjacent taboret), where he is doing it (in a north-facing studio), and on what (a painting

executed by Matisse in 1917). The canvas is dirty, but it is also dinged. Coddington tells us about these marks and about what earlier conservators have said about them. In all this, we have the fixings of the standard treatment report. But in none of it does Coddington follow the tradition of the pseudoscientific, passively voiced impersonal actor. His own experience, tool in hand in front of the painting, like Geertz's in Bali, is never far from the narration. He is talking to the reader, talking her through his experience and his way of seeing. He puts at the center the problem of "analogy"—that the work of the conservator is often described through analogies designed to make it more familiar and immediate to auditors. He wonders at the elusiveness that the use of analogy, paradoxically, only underscores: How to communicate that "X"? Walking us through the treatment reports of his predecessors, he sees the outlines of a history visible only to those able to reconstruct what isn't there from what is.

His own use of analogy follows: trying to understand what happened to the top of that Matisse from his own experience standing on a ladder looking at the top of Jackson Pollock's *One #31, 1950*, which, in turn, led him beyond conservation history to Ben Heller's account of how he and Pollock installed the painting in Heller's home.<sup>8</sup>

Writing like this approaches the kind of descriptive writing done by John McPhee, for example, in his book about canoes. *The Survival of the Bark Canoe* (first published in 1975) is "about"—if it is about anything other than what its title advertises—Edwin Tappan Adney, who "so thoroughly dedicated himself to the preservation of knowledge of the bark canoe that he was still doing research" when he died at eighty-one. McPhee tells of the making of the canoe's center thwart and then gives us a step-by-step account of building a canoe from the peeling of the bark to finishing the last stroke. He calls this the "Indian Methodology." McPhee dedicates himself to knowing the most basic details. None is too small. But note that McPhee does not devote a single connected section to the object that is the canoe—he spreads out the discussion.<sup>9</sup> Coddington's piece is shorter and focused. But could he—or someone following down the path he offers—have written a book about a painting or about a painting process that included the personalities and the materials in McPhee's way? Most assuredly.

Ekphrasis was a technology. It was a way of communicating insight by summoning up images through words. Louis O. Mink, a philosopher, calls the descriptive work done by the likes of McPhee "narrative as a cognitive instrument." What does he mean? Like McPhee, he notes that narrative works by leaving things out. It's a principle of selection. Narrative structure answers questions, mainly implicitly. For instance, even when writing monographs that are analytical, there is often a presumed narrative structure ("decline and fall"; "rise of . . ."). "Historians," Mink writes, "would in fact be ill-advised to relegate skill in managing narrative complexity to the status of a merely literary grace irrelevant to the hard-cognitive stuff of historical research."<sup>10</sup> This is the problem philosophers describe in terms of "colligation" but which most working historians never address directly. Henry Adams, America's Burckhardt, put it inescapably clearly, though only in his posthumously published autobiography:

Historians undertake to arrange sequences—called stories, or histories—assuming in silence a relation of cause and effect. These assumptions, hidden in the depths of dusty libraries, have been astounding, but commonly unconscious and childlike; so much so, that if any captious critic were to drag them to light, historians would probably reply, with

one voice, that they had never supposed themselves required to know what they were talking about.<sup>11</sup>

Mink argues in favor of historians being required “to know what they [are] talking about,” to theorize their practice rather than just do it. Some might feel that this is not necessary. But let me here invoke Max Weber. In 1906, responding to a similar challenge, he explained that “Methodology” was not necessary in order to do good work, “just as one does not need to have knowledge of anatomy in order to walk ‘correctly.’” Moreover, if you did know how to work, that degree of reflexiveness could even lead you to stumble. But when a crisis creates a need to teach someone to walk again, that is when knowledge of anatomy is crucial. So, too, “when a major shift occurs in the ‘viewpoints’ from which [the] material becomes an object of description,” then we “require a revision of the logical forms that have hitherto provided the framework for that ‘pursuit.’”<sup>12</sup>

Mink wanted us to think about the historian’s blind spot, the unthinking, or unselfconscious, adoption of structuring narratives, because he thought historians could no longer blithely go about their business. They needed to know “anatomy.” “My central thesis is that the questions we should ask are about narrative *form* as a cognitive instrument.”<sup>13</sup>

We will want to explore this more. But we will also want to ask what alternatives there might be to the narrative form and to the use of those materials excluded by the choice of one or another narrative line. Finally, Mink leaves us by observing that while historians are trained up with rules for evidence, they are not given instruction in how to write that evidence. The deep secret of history is that it claims a status of science—that is, truth based on evidence—but presents itself in writing, and is thus based on imagination, for which historians are given no training in use nor in conceptualization nor in theoretical justification. “The significance of the past,” Mink concludes, which is the basis for the selection process encoded in narrative, “is determinate only by virtue of our own disciplined imagination.”<sup>14</sup> Or, in Weber’s words, from an essay of 1904, by the “methodologically-schooled imagination.”<sup>15</sup> Mink leaves us with the idea that imagination is at the heart of historical writing and historical writing cannot be separated from historical thinking. All this will be important for our enterprise of writing conservation.

I first heard the phrase “writing as a cognitive tool” from the mouth of Carlo Ginzburg, before I read Mink’s version on the page. Later, I learned that Ginzburg had used it during an interview appended to the French translation of his essay “Just One Witness: The Extermination of the Jews and the Principle of Reality.”<sup>16</sup> He explained that in the mid-1970s he was part of the project of a magazine launched by Italo Calvino. He was charmed by Raymond Queneau’s *Exercices de style* (1947; Italian translation, 1969) and thought to write the book that became *The Cheese and the Worms* in different styles. “Something had stuck, indirectly,” he recalled, “from my reading of Queneau’s book.” His main point was simple: “Novelists make discoveries of techniques that historians could well use as cognitive tools.”<sup>17</sup>

Queneau took one simple, paragraph-long (108 words) story and then manipulated it in ninety-nine different ways, some much shorter (22 words) and some much longer (558 words), most in prose, but some in poetry. Each story, of course, emerged slightly changed by the difference in style. Which was the point. We could see Queneau also as the inspiration for Julio Cortázar’s

*Hopscotch (Rayuela)*, written in Paris and published in Spanish in 1963, with instructions to readers on how to skip through its 155 chapters, the last 99 of which were qualified as “expendable.” And this novel, in turn, was the inspiration for Sven Lindqvist’s *A History of Bombing* (2000), with its 399 sections, 436 footnotes, and eleven-page bibliography, a book that he describes in another “How to Read This Book” section as “a labyrinth with twenty-two entrances and no exit.” Each of its sections comes with guidance on what to read next. Instead of chapters in a table of contents there are “Ways into This Book” with twenty-two signposted routes of daisy-chained, but generally noncontinuous, sections. Lundqvist also offers nine chronologically keyed ways through the book, though from this perspective the sections read continuously. Narrative, these writers show us, is neither simple nor intuitive.

If we return now to the question of narrative in the natural and the human sciences, we find that a major difference between them is that in the latter, form cannot be separated from content. Think of those treatment reports. They are meant to communicate information in a way that could be used by other people who could not be expected to sift the life of the writer in order to understand the content. M. Norton Wise, writing about scientific simulations, wants us to think differently. He says that something similar to the human sciences happens there as well, “for they provide effectively a historical narrative of the reactions.” Simulations also allow for contingencies. They “map out the space of possibilities as real developmental possibilities and facilitate the grasping together in a single thought of the whole process of bond formation.” In pulling together a story, the same unspoken sifting process of the possible and the excluded would be occurring on the conservator’s workbench as on the historian’s. Moreover, as in Queneau-Cortázar-Lindqvist, there is a play between the story told and the possible stories to tell. They try to bring this into some kind of visibility. Wise explains that “this knowledge of the possible deepens our understanding of the actual.” The “seeming paradox is,” he continues, “that, in connecting actualities, the successful explanation opens unrealized but realistic possibilities, and it is just in this opening of possibilities that *understanding* is located.”<sup>18</sup> He draws on Robert Nozick, who explicitly writes that “explanation locates something in actuality . . . while understanding locates it in a network of possibility,” and then Geoffrey Hawthorn, who built upon Nozick to argue that history “promises that kind of understanding which comes from locating an actual in a space of possibles.”<sup>19</sup>

By invoking “understanding,” Wise is relocating this discussion in the nineteenth century’s terminological landscape. In the post-Helmholtzian world, humanists embraced understanding (*verstehen*), which they contrasted with the natural scientist’s ambition to explain (*erklären*). The elevation of the faculty of understanding, which had its own prior history, enabled the nineteenth-century humanities to assert their scientific bona fides.<sup>20</sup> Wise is using this today to defend the situatedness of scientific writing, with understanding providing the bridge between author and structure. He argues that historians have for too long relied on a simplistic identification of explanation with necessity. In fact, he wants us to think that all attempts to reconstruct the past and then represent it in words have to confront contingency.

This is an invitation to us to go back to the middle decades of the nineteenth century, and the paradigmatic formulation of historical practice presented by Johann Gustav Droysen in his lecture series “Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Geschichte” (Encyclopedia and methodology of history), delivered from 1857 to 1883 and published in outline and ever-revised form in 1863, 1875, and 1883. In the section devoted to writing, Droysen linked the work of writing history to

the communication of reality. “We have also very keenly recognized that history is a matter of reality, i.e. We will also be able to say with Humboldt about the relationship between ideas and the material in which they are realized: the historian’s business in its last, but simplest, resolution is representation of the striving of an idea to win existence in reality.”<sup>21</sup> But just because he is talking about ideas, he hastens to add that he is not imagining that historical writing should be guided by “artistic, aesthetic formations.”<sup>22</sup> On the contrary.

There were four kinds of writing done by historians. The first, Droysen called the “investigative” mode (*Die untersuchende Darstellung*). It follows the research process—“The thought or thought-complex obtained in methodical research”—that “determines the course of the presentation.” But its writing was not to be presented mimetically, “only insofar as it determines what was necessary to lead to it and have it found.”<sup>23</sup> “This type of presentation,” Droysen writes,

is not the investigation itself; Rather, if I may say so, it is an image of it, and in a sense idealized, the mimesis of the investigation, for the many aberrations, deceptions and unsuccessfulnesses with which the investigation itself was accompanied are left out; one only takes up what has proven to be the goal; since you have the result before you start the presentation, it is up to you to arrange the order of the combinations and conclusions in the way that is most likely to prepare the result and allow it to appear in front of the reader.<sup>24</sup>

The telling over of the research could proceed “either in such a way that one seems to be searching, or in such a way that one seems to be finding.”<sup>25</sup> It starts either from a question whose solution is unfolded or from an answer, the discussion of which allows for the unfolding of the historian’s labor (Droysen’s preference). He was distinctly uncomfortable with the presentation of “raw” data, whether in excerpt or list form. The reader’s direct encounter with sources was not a priority of his and even threatened misunderstanding. In any case, history was how one interpreted those sources by embedding them in bigger narratives—Mink’s configurations. Only antiquarians were content with presenting sources directly to readers.<sup>26</sup>

The second type of representation he called “narrative.” We might think of it as a storytelling practice. Droysen himself pairs it in conception with research writing.

It is the antistrophe of the investigative. It represents the thought not as the result of an investigation, but as the result of a genetic process, the moments of which this thought determines; it shows how it gradually develops and also is worked through; and just as, according to our human point of view, the diversity of things appears in the form of becoming, so this form gives a mimesis of becoming; and that is why this form has been called artistic, although the investigative is also artistic, namely a mimesis of investigation.<sup>27</sup>

The third type of exposition was didactic and sought to draw conclusions for the education of people in the present. This is where historical writing blurred into education for culture (*Bildung*). The fourth was “discussive”—to take all that we know about a particular past and focus it on a question of interest in the present. For us, this might register more as long-form journalism.

Droysen concluded his presentation by acknowledging that the term “historian” was usually applied only to those who presented materials in narrative form. In this, as in much else presented in his lectures, Droysen offers a clear, precise picture of historical thinking rarely to be found elsewhere. But he never published his lectures, and never adapted this material to a form in which it could have influenced future historians. The summary of the lectures, which was translated immediately into French and English, lacked the heft to convert the unconcerned, let alone the unconvinced.

Wilhelm Dilthey had attended Droysen’s lectures and was influenced by Droysen’s way of thinking about hermeneutics, understanding, and explanation. But he did not devote any of his attention to questions of writing or narration. Dilthey, who was nicknamed “One-Volume Dilthey” by his students in Berlin because he never completed the second volumes of his *Life of Schleiermacher* or *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, was not a literary man, though he wrote and wrote all through his life (there are twenty-six volumes of his *Collected Writings*, and editors are still going).

Mink would classify Dilthey’s writing as scientific, or “theoretical,” and characterized by detachability and abstraction. Mink opposed this to the “configurational,” where the narrative and the facts merge—a form modeled by Goethe’s work on morphology, which is what makes Helmholtz’s repudiation of Goethe as a model for the natural sciences in 1853 so important to this story. Helmholtz forced humanists like Dilthey to write more like scientists in order for their subject matter to be taken seriously as science.

If we began with Coddington-McPhee as a possible model for writing conservation, and then expanded the possibilities via Ginzburg by way of Queneau, Cortázar, and Lindqvist, it is through the arguments of philosophers and historians of the sciences—Mink, Wise, Hawthorn, and, of course, Droysen—that we have opened up the texture of interpretive writing on the past. Let us turn now to an example that stands poised between fiction and nonfiction and fuses literary form with explanatory ambition: the lyric. It is “configurational,” in Mink’s sense, but at the same time it aims to intervene in a disciplinary conversation that remains “theoretical.” The lyric has also been described as “the literary form that gives the writer the best opportunity for rigorous investigation, because its theater is the world.”<sup>28</sup>

What might conservation writing in the lyric mode look like? One example from recent years is Sanchita Balachandran’s “Malignant Patina: A Love Story.”<sup>29</sup> It is a tale of how she came to Chennai, to the Chemical Conservation Laboratory in the Government Museum, to study S. Paramasivan, the conservator there who built the laboratory to study the bronze sculptures that she herself was now studying. He hid himself amid his books and articles and marginalia, so much so that it prodded her to reflect on the training that makes conservators erase their persons—and then it hit her: in the acknowledgements to one of his books she found her grandfather thanked. The article is a poetic meditation on the fully human feelings of loss and time, fragility and survival, but expressed through the quotidian detail of a conservator’s vision. And in this vision we encounter the conservator’s practice as a philosophical exercise, a training in managing the pain of loss, since loss is the conservator’s morning, afternoon, and night.

In writing this, Balachandran alerts us to the way we could think about conservation, too. Even the objects she tells us about had a foot in this other realm: a bronze statue could face bronze *disease*, for which the cure—redemption?—was baptism in the healing balm of sodium hydroxide. And, reflecting on the ritual devotion once showed to objects that now, in the care of museum curators, were served only with science, she asked, “Why is there no room in our reports to sing our devotion?” And still closer to our venture, here she comes to writing itself: “I’ve begun to wonder whether our writing feels so drained of feeling not because of our words, but rather because of the form of our words.” With this she exhorts all those who write conservation, “Come, come, I say! Let us sing their names!”<sup>30</sup>

Andrew Abbott writes about just such a “lyrical” mode in the hope of reimagining sociological inquiry. But if we read his essay with conservation in mind, we shall come close to understanding the possibilities in writing conservation.

The first thing to note is his title: “Against Narrative.” Abbott is telling us that he sees the lyrical as an alternative to the narrative. But narrative for him includes both narrative as storytelling (Mink) and narrative as quantitative inquiry (Wise). He defines the lyrical as follows:

Lyrical sociology is characterized by an engaged, nonironic stance toward its object of analysis, by specific location of both its subject and its object in social space and by a momentaneous conception of social time. Lyrical sociology typically uses strong figuration and personification and aims to communicate its author’s emotional stance toward his or her object of study, rather than to “explain” that object.<sup>31</sup>

For Abbott, the lyrical mode forces us to confront the instability of everything—ourselves and our sources—and to acknowledge that we are radically different from the things we study. It is in its ability to combine a sense of connectedness with that of difference that gives the lyric its humane sympathy. This is the territory of *verstehen*, and Abbott explicitly makes this identification with understanding—and thus sociology’s origins, since Weber’s first use of the term “sociology” qualified it as “*vestehende Soziologie*”—by declaring that the lyric does not offer “explanation.”<sup>32</sup>

In reaching for the lyric, Abbott is putting the image at the center of representation. The lyrical is not narrative because its framing structure is not a story, with its imperatives to recount, explain, or comprehend, but rather an effort to convey a specific mood or feeling, which will bring the reader to where the author is. Being “against” narrative, for Abbott, is a way of being “against” the form taken by sociology (or against the stance taken by the discipline of sociology *against* other possible forms of its expression). “Colorless imagination and plodding moralism,” he writes, have driven sociology to unimportance.<sup>33</sup> We might ask: Is there not a similar opportunity for conservation to refashion itself in the adoption of a different way of writing? Abbott notes, for example, that personification in the lyric is of subjects not generally personified, including inanimate objects. Does this not suggest an opportunity for conservation?

Moreover, the emotional location of the lyric is “curious without exoticism, sympathetic without presumption, and thoughtful without judgment.” Abbott calls this “humane sympathy.” Geertz had defined this as the outcome of our sense of connectedness with the heightened-by-training sense of difference that writers and scholars famously have, or should have.<sup>34</sup> Can we not extend this to

the conservator? Is it not present throughout Balachandran's memoir-as-conservation-history? Might "humane sympathy" be another way of talking about "care"?

In lyric, we come closest to accepting the indeterminacy of reality as both starting and ending point. And this brings us closest to the question we flagged at the start: narrative produces understanding through exclusion. Other genres or formats such as the lyric, but perhaps not exclusively the lyric, might allow us to recuperate the excluded possibilities as well as the complexity evaded by that exclusion. This brings us back to the possibilities still available to us in what Droysen called "investigative representation," and we might call "research writing."

Roland Barthes tried to find a way to talk about this other kind of writing. "Research: The Young" (first published 1972) was produced for an issue of the journal *Communication* devoted to work by young researchers. He tells us that he is writing about "mainly the research itself, or at least a certain research, research still linked to the traditional realm of arts and letters."<sup>35</sup> We can read it as offering guidance toward a new kind of conservation writing. It will be different again from both McPhee and Abbott; definitely not narrative, but not even lyrical.

In the same way that research is seen as preparatory to the finished work, so Barthes compares the kind of writing done by young scholars with that done by more senior colleagues. The young are prescribed to and are constrained in what they can write. The reward structure of academia may favor the aged, but Barthes saw that there was something deep in the nature of research that favored the young—and that since research was, ultimately, the engine driving academia, there was a structural advantage here to be acknowledged and embraced. "The task (of research)," he wrote, "must be perceived in desire."<sup>36</sup> Barthes is here channeling Proust.

But in this strange phase of love, an individual person assumes something so profound that the curiosity he now felt awakening in him concerning the smallest occupations of this woman, was the same curiosity he had once had about History. And all these things that would have shamed him up to now, such as spying, tonight, outside a window, tomorrow perhaps, for all he knew, cleverly inducing neutral people to speak, bribing servants, listening at doors, now seemed to him to be, fully as much as were the deciphering of texts, the weighting of evidence, and the interpretation of old monuments, merely methods of scientific investigation with a real intellectual value and appropriate to a search for the truth.<sup>37</sup>

What Barthes saw in research was an energy that could overcome the sluggishness of academic inertia—what Abbott wanted to explode with the lyrical. Barthes wants to liberate desire—the eros of research—by authorizing a new kind of writing or legitimating an existing kind. "Here the intention has been that the work of research be *from its inception* the object of a strong demand, formulated outside the institution—a demand which can only be the demand of writing." Barthes defines the space marked out by this kind of writing—research writing—as a "utopia."<sup>38</sup>

For Barthes, the core of the problem lay in the fiction that research is "reported, not written." That "the researcher is essentially a prospector of raw materials, and it is on this level that his problems are raised; once he has communicated his 'results,' everything is solved; 'formulation' is nothing more than a vague final operation, rapidly performed according to a few techniques of 'expression'

learned in secondary school and whose only constraint is submission to the code of the genre.”<sup>39</sup> But what would happen, Barthes wants us to wonder, if we accepted that research was made, not just reported—think of the parallel to Mink’s notion of universal history as existing “out there” waiting for historians to come and bring it down to earth—and that it was made through writing. This would mean not only accepting a creative dimension to research but also rehabilitating the kind of writing done by researchers: precisely what was typically suppressed or excluded by narrative (and theorizing narratives).

Barthes coins a term, “the reality effect,” to describe the bolstering work performed by detail in “specific genres such as the realistic novel, the private diary, documentary literature, the news item, the historical museum, the exhibition of ancient objects, and, above all, the massive development of photography.” Narrative propped up by detail seemed real and stable, walled off from the frenzy of facts constantly churned up by unending research. Barthes’ judgment was sharp: “historical discourse is a fake performative discourse in which the apparent constative (descriptive) is in fact only the signifier of the speech-act as an act of authority.”<sup>40</sup> Were this effort dropped, and the energies pent up in maintaining it liberated, all sorts of new possibilities for writing would emerge.

But if research is to be acknowledged as something written, not just reported, then the writer needs be brought back. And if we are to fully explore this parallel between the researcher and the conservator, we will need to rehabilitate the conservator as author. The core of this identity must be the encounter of person and thing. The treatment report, as it has evolved, is where this happens. Coddington and Balachandran offer examples of research being presented in a fully literary way, with a psychologically powerful center and a delicate attention to precision of act and measurement.

We might still want to know more: What do they think would be the consequence of this re-engineering on the figure of the conservator herself? What would it mean for her training? What would it mean for her ambitions? What would it mean for the kind of knowledge deemed valuable enough to communicate? What would it mean for the self-image of the community of conservators and their relations with other knowledge communities? What would it mean for the aspiration of conservation toward the objectivity—and prestige—of the natural sciences or, indeed, for the high wall separating the human from the natural sciences?

I want to end with another example that pushes us into this future. Julia M. Brennan’s essay in this publication is subtitled “Heart-Based Science.” In it, she places the conservator in the exquisite place between objects—garments worn by victims of genocide—and the history that marked them. “Remnants of death and unimaginable trauma, they are memory made tangible, imbued with untold stories and the spirit, the ‘who,’ of those who wore them.”<sup>41</sup> How to prepare to be the person working in that space? What does it mean to deploy long years of patient, slow training in conservation studios and laboratories for work on objects that are still screaming? Brennan tells us that this forensic work of care is uncharted in conservation theory or training. Its chief tool is empathy—which means imagination. At this furthest extreme from the idea of matter’s passivity we are, by contrast, in an entirely activated space, one buzzing with the fullness of human life, including its cruel extinction. This is conservation as memory work. Writing this takes us to the

edge of lyric, where fragmentation and imagery almost fly free, but remain tied by the faintest gossamer of memory to these last, material traces. "No longer an object, but life."<sup>42</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Evelyn's sketches for a coat of arms for the new organization around 1660 include this motto. Hunter, *Establishing the New Science*, xiv.

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<sup>2</sup> Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Skinner explains the pivot in terms of Hobbes's taking stock of the English debacle of 1640–60 and drawing conclusions from it. *Reason and Rhetoric*, 431–35. On Hobbes versus the Royal Society, the classic text is Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, specifically chaps. 2–3.

<sup>4</sup> Helmholtz, "Scientific Researches of Goethe."

<sup>5</sup> Geertz, "Being There," 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> I discuss this more fully in "Max Weber in the Museum."

<sup>8</sup> Coddington, "[Raising the Blinds](#)."

<sup>9</sup> McPhee, *Survival of the Bark Canoe*, 15–16, 47–51.

<sup>10</sup> Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," 131–35.

<sup>11</sup> Adams, *Education of Henry Adams*, 382, quoted in Conn, "Generic Turn," 43.

<sup>12</sup> Weber, "Critical Studies," 140.

<sup>13</sup> Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," 141.

<sup>14</sup> Weber, "Critical Studies," 144–45.

<sup>15</sup> Weber, "'Objectivity' of Knowledge," 118.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Mangeot, "De près, de loin."

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 97–99.

<sup>18</sup> Wise, "On the Narrative Form of Simulations," 9.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*; Nozick, quoted in Hawthorn, *Plausible Worlds*, 17, 10, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Wach, *Das Verstehen*; Riedel, *Verstehen oder Erklären?*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> "Auch wir haben in schärfster Weise anerkannt, daß es sich in der Geschichte um Wirklichkeiten, d.h. um das Verhältnis von Ideen und dem Stoff, in dem sie sich realisieren, handle, auch wir werden mit Humboldt sagen dürfen: das Geschäft des Geschichtsschreibers in seiner letzten, aber einfachsten Auflösung sei Darstellung des Strebens einer Idee, Dasein in der Wirklichkeit zu gewinnen." Droysen, *Historik*, 1:217.

<sup>22</sup> "künstlerische, ästhetische Formungen." *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> "Der [in] methodischer Forschung gewonnene Gedanke oder Gedanken-komplex bestimmt allerdings den Gang der Darstellung, aber nur insofern [, als] er bestimmt, was nötig war, um zu ihm zu führen und ihn finden zu lassen. Das Interesse der Darstellung ist nur auf diesen Gedanken, auf diese Erscheinungsform des Gedankens, auf diese Tatsache gewandt; es kommt nur darauf an, ihn festzustellen." *Ibid.*, 1:220.

<sup>24</sup> "Denn—und das ist das Wesentliche—diese Art der Darstellung ist nicht etwa die Untersuchung selbst; sondern sie ist, wenn ich so sagen darf, ein Abbild derselben, und zwar ein in gewissen Sinn idealisiertes, die Mimesis der Untersuchung, denn die vierlei Abirrungen, Täuschungen und Erfolglosigkeiten, mit denen die Untersuchung selbst begleitet war, läßt man hinweg; man nimmt nur das auf, was sich als zum Ziele führend erwiesen hat; da man das Ergebnis hat, bevor man die Darstellung unternimmt, so hat man es in der Hand, die Reihenfolge der Kombinationen und Schlüsse so zu ordnen, wie sie am sichersten das Ergebnis vorbereiten und vor den Augen des Lesers entstehen lassen." *Ibid.*, 1:225.

<sup>25</sup> "Für die Darstellung der Untersuchung kann man nun entweder so verfahren, daß man zu suchen scheint, oder so, daß man zu finden scheint." *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> See Droysen's introduction to his *Lectures on the Sources of History Since 1500* (1878), published in *Historik*, 2:523.

<sup>27</sup> "Sie ist gleichsam die Antistrophe der untersuchenden. Sie stellt den Gedanken nicht als Ergebnis einer Untersuchung, sondern als das Resultat eines genetischen Verlaufs dar, dessen Momente eben dieser Gedanke bestimmt; sie zeigt, wie er schrittweise wird, und auch durcharbeitet; und wie denn uns nach unserer menschlichen Betrachtungsweise die Mannigfaltigkeit der Dinge in der Gestalt des Werdens erscheint, so gibt diese Form eine Mimesis des Werdens; und eben darum hat man diese Form die künstlerische genannt, obschon auch die untersuchende künstlerischer Art ist, nämlich eine Mimesis der Untersuchung." Droysen, *Historik*, 1:220.

<sup>28</sup> Shields, *Reality Hunger*, 107. Shields also tells us that "the lyric essayist seems to enjoy all the liberties of the fiction writer, with none of a fiction writer's burden of unreality" (65); "the lyric essay asks what happens when an essay begins to behave less like an essay and more like a poem" (72); it "is suggestive rather than exhaustive" (384); and that what it "inherits from the public essay is a fact-hungry pursuit of solutions to problems" (612).

<sup>29</sup> Balachandran, "[Malignant Patina](#)."

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>31</sup> Abbott, "Against Narrative," 67.

<sup>32</sup> Weber, "On Some Categories," 273–74.

<sup>33</sup> Abbott, "Against Narrative," 73.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>35</sup> Barthes, "Research," 69.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Proust, *Swann's Way*, 284.

<sup>38</sup> Barthes, "Research," 70.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>41</sup> Brennan, "[Inclusive Conservation.](#)"

<sup>42</sup> [Ibid.](#)