

G H O S T S   I N   T H E  
D E T A I L S



C H R I S T O P H E R   B R A M

“The past is a foreign country,” L. P. Hartley wrote in *The Go-Between*: “they do things differently there.” So it’s no surprise that good history writing, fiction and nonfiction, often resembles good travel writing. We read travel books for the anomalies and surprises of other countries and cultures. We want to see things that are different, and see them vividly. We visit the past in much the same way. Difference enables us to see things more intensely. If things are too different, however, we can’t connect or respond. Make it strange, we say, but not too strange.

We experience this historical difference most keenly through details, the odd objects or striking moments or alien bits of behavior that snap another world to life. Details are the raisins in the raisin bread. Story is the bread. Let’s talk about the raisins.

Here’s a brief sample of memorable details from history, biography, and novels:

The opening page of *The Leopard*, by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, presents an aristocratic family kneeling in prayer. The outward piety and formality, like a nineteenth-century group portrait, evoke Sicily in 1860. Then we read, “The women rose slowly to their feet, their oscillating skirts as they withdrew baring

bit by bit the naked figures from mythology painted all over the milky depths of the tiles.” In one sentence we see the period clothes, the old palace, and the contradictory inner life.

Arthur Schlesinger in *The Coming of the New Deal* mentions that F.D.R. preferred not to wear his bridgework but always put it into his mouth before he gave his Fireside Chats on the radio; otherwise he hissed his s’s.

*Memoirs of Hadrian*, by Marguerite Yourcenar, is written in a voice so close to the Roman emperor that the past dissolves into timelessness. But now and then odd details plunge us back into the past, as when he tells us about the trials of public speaking in the rain. “Protected only by my toga, which caught the water in its gutter-like folds, I had to continually wipe the rain from my eyes as I pronounced my discourses. Catching cold is an emperor’s privilege in Rome, since he is forbidden, regardless of weather, to put anything over the toga.”

Mary Beth Norton’s account of the Salem witch trials, *In the Devil’s Snare*, includes details missing in most other accounts. Townspeople began to dream of witches, and their visions – feasts of red bread, a yellow bird nursing at a tit on a witch’s finger, an animal spirit with the head of a bird and body of a lion – sound less like Puritan New England and more like images from Hieronymous Bosch.

Tolstoy declares in the first chapter of *War and Peace* that his upper-class Russian characters frequently use French, “the elegant tongue of our grandparents, who used it for thought as well as speech.” (A recent translator feels that this isn’t enough strangeness and presented those conversations in French – even though Tolstoy himself put them in Russian in later editions.)

Samuel Eliot Morison pauses in his encyclopedic *The European Discovery of America* to tell us that wine stored by the Greeks and Vikings in wineskins (with the hairy side facing in) had a distinctly gamey taste.

Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* includes two glorious pages on the coming of the nineteenth century as a cloudy, fertile dampness that produced ivy, babies, and the British Empire. The damp even “gets into the inkpot as it gets into the woodwork – sentences swelled, adjectives multiplied, lyrics became epics, and little trifles that had been essays a column long were now encyclopedias in ten

or twenty volumes.” Pure fantasy, of course, but nobody who’s read those pages will ever think of Victorian England in the same way.

*Son of the Morning Star*, by Evan S. Connell, includes the story of a man named William Thompson who survives his own scalping – it sounded from inside like “bubbles or blisters popping” – and rides home on a train with his scalp floating in a bucket of water.

And so on. Some details are more trivial than others. They can be physical, social, or psychological, yet all help us enter the foreign country of the past. They mix the familiar and the strange. They work through surprise but also through precision, word choice, and humor. Most good writing is built out of details, of course, small strokes of observation, little shocks of recognition. It’s said that the devil speaks in generalizations but God is in the details. I don’t know about God, but there are ghosts in historical details, and ghosts can be very useful in storytelling.

Details, specifics, particulars are what many of us enjoy most when reading history. They are like illustrations in the text. They are what we remember. Their importance becomes clear in books where they are absent or few. Steven Runciman writes clear, crisp, elegant sentences about the thirteenth-century Mediterranean in *The Sicilian Vespers*, but we read desperately from page to page, hungry for another “human interest” moment such as the time a Byzantine emperor is murdered in his bath with a stone soap dish.

But not all details are good. There are research details, period details, which are just data from the past and not terribly interesting in themselves. There is pleasure in recovering old things from the junk shop of history, but an overload of period details can clog a narrative. Tolstoy uses surprisingly few, which is one reason why *War and Peace* remains alive. He tosses them in now and then when they are needed. George Eliot piles on the data in her historical tales, so that *Romola*, her Renaissance novel, and even *Adam Bede*, set in the late eighteenth century, can be a chore for modern readers. This is the Reverend Mr. Irvine’s dining room in *Adam Bede*:

The room is a large and lofty one, with an ample mullioned oriel window at one end; the walls, you see, are new and not yet painted; but the furniture, though originally of an expensive sort, is old and scanty, and there is no drapery about the

window. The crimson cloth over the large dining-table is very threadbare, though it contrasts pleasantly enough with the dead hue of the plaster on the walls; but on this cloth there is a massive silver waiter [a tray] with a decanter of water on it, of the same pattern as two larger ones that are propped up on the sideboard with a coat of arms conspicuous in their center.

It's not without interest, but not everyone wants to wade through a Sears Roebuck catalogue to get to the story.

In most successful books about history, fiction and nonfiction, the story is in the foreground and the details are neatly woven into it. They're hard to pull loose. But let's cheat and look at a couple of books where the details dominate.

*The Leopard* is all details, and good details, too. There is a plot, but it floats just beneath the surface like a submerged wreck. This is a historical novel where all the history takes place offstage, just as it does in the lives of most readers. Set in the early 1860s during the Risorgimento, the reunification of Italy, the book tells the story of Fabrizio Corbera, Prince of Salina, the forty-five-year-old head of a large, wealthy family with palaces and estates in different parts of Sicily. Known as the Leopard, *Il Gattopardo*, after the family crest, the Prince represents the old order, yet he is not the dinosaur we expect. He is intelligent, curious, open-minded. He is aware of the changing times, but he doesn't fight them. He doesn't join the change either, although he's in partial sympathy with it. He encourages his nephew, Tancredi, to become part of it, but remains detached himself. He serves as a remarkable conduit for ideas and emotions about the losses and gains of history.

The movie made by Luchino Visconti from the novel is excellent, faithful to its unconventional shape and exquisite feeling for detail. Yet even a great movie can only scratch the surface of the inner life the prose renders so beautifully. Lampedusa concentrates not on story but on individual days, much as Tolstoy and Turgenev did in their work. (V. S. Pritchett discussed this approach in his lovely essay "The Russian Day," where he explored how inclusive a single day can be. "In all these Russian novels we seem to hear a voice saying: 'The meaning of life? One day that will be

revealed to us – probably on a Thursday.’”) *The Leopard* takes place during a handful of days scattered over three years. Two chapters at the end look into the future. Drama, emotion, and ideas are revealed in details presented over the course of each day.

The first chapter covers twenty-four hours, from afternoon prayer to afternoon prayer, in the main estate outside Palermo. There is a “disturbance” in the city – a revolt against the Austrian rulers – whose meaning the Prince understands all too well. But he goes on with his daily routine, which includes dinner with his family, a visit to a prostitute, meetings with tenants, and an astronomy session with Father Pirrone, the family priest. Pirrone is ostensibly the spiritual master but he is dependent on the Prince for his livelihood. He carefully balances his duty to God with what he owes his short-tempered employer. The two men disagree about politics and don’t agree entirely on religion, yet both love astronomy. In a few pages Lampedusa gives us a complicated, layered relationship that is both foreign and recognizable.

After the liberation of Palermo by Garibaldi (which Lampedusa lightly skips over), the Salina family travels by caravan to their palace in Donnafugata, a dusty town in a treeless region of the interior. The Prince is a feudal lord here, and he worries about how he’ll be treated after the recent political changes. The family is received with the usual pomp in the town square. The first new note is that the town band plays selections from *La Traviata*, the most recent opera by the new nation’s musical hero, Verdi. Even the organist in the church performs a piece from this tragic tale of a Parisian courtesan. The world is clearly shifting. Outside the church, the Princess invites the local dignitaries to dinner. There is doubt over whether the men’s wives are dignified enough to be included. But the Prince intervenes and invites the wives, too: “And he added, turning to the others, ‘And after dinner, at nine o’clock, we shall be happy to see all our friends.’ For a long time Donnafugata commented on these last words. And the Prince, who had found Donnafugata unchanged, was found very much changed himself; for never before would he have issued so cordial an invitation: and from that moment, invisibly, began the decline of his prestige.” It’s a wonderfully simple moment, the shift from feudal order to democratic free-for-all expressed in a thoughtless gesture of good manners.

“If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change,” Tancredi tells the Prince early on. It becomes a mantra for the novel, a justification for the shifts that will gradually change everything.

The change is all in little dramas, never big ones. Tancredi courts the daughter of the mayor, a former peasant with a fortune. The Prince votes for unification in a local plebiscite, but is disgusted when the mayor declares the vote unanimous – he knows several men who voted against it. Nevertheless, he surrenders his nephew to the daughter of a man he now calls a jackal. An emissary from Turin visits and invites the Prince to join the new government as a senator. The Prince refuses in a strange, fatalistic, revealing speech about the vanity and insularity of Sicilians. “I am sorry; but I cannot lift a finger in politics. It would only get bitten.” The next day, he tells his visitor good-bye and adds, “We were the Leopards and Lions; those who’ll take our place will be little jackals, hyenas; and the whole lot of us, Leopards, jackals and sheep, we’ll all go on thinking ourselves the salt of the earth.”

The novel is both a pastoral and an elegy, the beautiful evocation of a paradise that’s appealing for modern readers even as we see the seeds of its paralysis and demise. And it’s all revealed not in high dramas but by well-chosen details.

Details are usually used more sparingly in nonfiction history, but Connell’s *Son of the Morning Star* is a treasure house of detail. Connell assumes we all know the basic story of Custer’s Last Stand, the great American symbol of white hubris and Indian justice, and he turns his attention to the mountains of anecdotes he discovered in diaries, letters, memoirs, court transcripts, and old history books while researching the massacre. *The Leopard* is told chronologically, which makes it easier to sense the story hidden underneath. Connell dispenses with chronology and presents his anecdotes with their own helter-skelter order. They are more vivid than they would have been if embedded in a conventional narrative.

He opens in the middle of the story, in medias res: “Lt. James Bradley led a detachment of Crow Indian Scouts up the Bighorn Valley in the summer of 1876.” The reader already knows what these men will find in this rolling, treeless landscape, but Connell

takes his time, letting what's known become a mystery again. Bradley and his men see something in the distance. Several paragraphs later they report what they find.

Lt. Bradley returned from the other side of the river to say that the dark objects on the hillside thought to be buffalo skins were, in fact, dead horses. What had been mistaken for skinned buffalo carcasses were the naked bodies of Custer's men. Bradley had counted 197 dead soldiers. This news paralyzed the advancing army. A mule packer in Roe's company, Pvt. William H. White, said that for a quarter of an hour there was very little talking.

Story leads to story, digression to digression. From one page to the next, the book feels shapeless, but it has just enough structure under this fluid surface to remain solid. After the discovery of the massacre, Connell gives an account of Reno's unit, which survived. (Reno attacked the Little Big Horn village from the east while Custer attacked from the north. Reno fled and was pinned down by the Indians for three days.) Then he loops back to short bios of Reno and his men, a life of Crazy Horse, tales of Indian life, tales of army life, flashbacks to the Civil War, flash forwards to the twentieth century, and a full-scale portrait of George Armstrong Custer and his wife, Libby. Finally he gives us the event at the center of the story, the slaughter of Custer and his men. Withholding that key scene holds the book together with the suspense of waiting for the other boot to drop.

Connell was a novelist before he became a historian, the author of several fine books, including two crisp, quiet novels about his family, *Mrs. Bridge* and *Mr. Bridge*. He was always an inventive, unconventional writer with a keen appreciation of the anomalies of human behavior. In *Son of the Morning Star* he regularly pursues any interesting tale that catches his interest, even if it's not immediately relevant to the whole. He sometimes gives contradictory versions of the same anecdote, but not so many that we become lost. The book is like a jigsaw puzzle where most of the pieces have been laid out but not yet fitted together – including many extra pieces. It's a rare page that doesn't contain something worth noting or quoting. Here are Reno's men describing the withdrawal of the Sioux and Cheyenne after three days of fighting:

One member of H Company, Charles Windolph, recalled many years later: “The heavy smoke seemed to lift for a few moments, and there in the valley below we caught glimpses of thousands of Indians on foot and horseback, with their pony herds and travois, dogs and pack animals, and all the trappings of a great camp, slowly moving southward. It was like some Biblical exodus; the Israelites moving into Egypt; a mighty tribe on the march.” Lt. Edgerly felt less poetic: “I thought before the ponies commenced to move that it was like a lot of brown underbrush; it was the largest number of quadrupeds I ever saw in my life . . . It looked as though a heavy carpet was being moved over the ground.”

We see the scene vividly in the twin points of view, as if in a pair of binoculars looking back through 140 years.

Here is Custer’s own account of his first ride in an observation balloon during the Civil War:

The basket in which we were to be transported was about two feet high, four feet long, and slightly over half as wide, resembling in every respect an ordinary willow basket of the same dimensions, minus the handles. This basket was attached to the cords of the balloon. Stepping inside, my assistant, after giving directions to the men holding the four ropes, told me to take my place in the basket. I complied, and before being fully aware that such was the fact found that we were leaving *terra firma*, and noiselessly, almost imperceptibly, ascending toward the clouds. . . . The interstices in the sides and bottom [of the basket] seemed immense, and the further we receded from the earth the larger they seemed to become, until I almost imagined one might tumble through.

Any man who can tell such a story could not have been a complete idiot.

The book shouldn’t work, but it does, carrying the reader with its deadpan narrative voice and remarkable wealth of material. The vivid details cut through the myths and clichés to make the story new and strange again. And the myths are now part of the story, and Connell incorporates them, too, including the gory 1896 Anheuser-Busch lithograph of the battle that hung in saloons

across the country for decades. (One still hung in my local barbershop in Norfolk, Virginia, in the 1950s when I was a small boy. I remember staring at it in morbid fascination every time I got a haircut.)

When the big battle scene finally arrives at the end of the book, Connell continues to sketch with multiple overlapping lines and erasures, producing a half-blurred picture of a world in motion. Events are now told entirely from the viewpoints of the Cheyenne and Sioux, of course; the whites were all killed. The fight lasted less than a half hour. “The Americans went down like sheep, Rain [in the Face] said. It was as easy as killing sheep.” The last word is given to a Cheyenne woman named Kate Bighead, who told her story in sign language to a white doctor in 1927. The women, children, and old men all watched from a nearby ridge, but Kate Bighead got much closer. She saw the soldiers firing at Indians they couldn’t see while thousands of arrows fell from the sky, sticking in horses and the backs of men. She did not learn until later that the soldiers were led by the notorious Custer. “I have often wondered if, when I was riding among the dead where he was lying, my pony may have kicked dirt upon his body.” Those are the final words of the book, a small, surprising, perfect note at the end of this sprawling epic.

The best details in a work of history, fact or fiction, are like double knots of character and time: they tie us to both the people and the age they live in. Think, for example, of the ball in *The Leopard*, when the melancholy Prince waltzes with beautiful young Angelica and “at every twirl a year fell from his shoulders; soon he felt back at the age of twenty, when in that very same ballroom he had danced with [his wife] before he knew disappointment, boredom and the rest. For a second, that night, death seemed to him once more ‘something that happens to others.’” Few of us have any familiarity with fancy dress balls or even how to waltz, but all of us can recognize the Prince’s state of mind. In the middle of the endless killing at the end of *Son of the Morning Star* comes a moment of slapstick. A warrior named Iron Hawk sees a soldier playing dead while two old women strip him. When they start to castrate him, the naked man jumps up and swings them around as if they were dancing. Iron Hawk still found the story funny when

he told it years later. The comedy makes all the participants recognizably human, which adds to the horror of the experience.

How do writers find the right details? Through research, of course, but a loose, daydreamy, haphazard kind of research. They immerse themselves in the period they're writing about, reading history, memoirs, and novels. Old novels are especially good, but so are old newspapers, illustrated catalogues, and visits to museums and antiques shops. The exploration is mostly meant to put the writer into the mood, building an inner reality like a Method actor. They begin to notice particular anomalies and quirks that bring the past to life *for them*. They trust that these details will bring it alive for other readers, too. Sometimes a writer can use these discoveries whole. Other times he or she must forget them and rediscover them all over again in the imagination.

For example, years before I wrote a novel set in nineteenth-century New York, *The Notorious Dr. August*, I read Anthony Trollope's book about his visit to the city in 1862, *North America*. It is full of strange odds and ends, but the most vivid is Trollope's hatred of crinolines. He was obsessed with the fashion for enormous skirts spread over elaborate hoops and wires. He complained that they took up space in omnibuses and hallways, and he was always stepping on the hems and runners. I forgot about his account until I was writing about my narrator's childhood in a small house full of women in the 1860s. I remembered those crinolines, and I wanted to include them, but without going on at length the way Trollope had. I did it in one sentence: "Their enormous balloon skirts squashed through doorways and whistled against the wallpaper." The sound and sense brought the period to life in my mind in all its strangeness; I hoped it would do the same for some readers. But it also expressed Fitz's feeling of claustrophobia as a child, the fear that he was being crowded out of his own home.

The best details do the double duty of evoking both a character and an age. But there are also profound details that do triple duty, offering a glimpse into something larger, the society or religion or philosophy of the time. They are harder to achieve and tend to be unexpected inspirations or happy accidents.

Not all details work, of course. Sometimes they get in the way. Readers want the writer to make it strange, but too much strange-

ness can be distracting. Some historians and biographers like to give quotations in their original archaic spellings and capitalization to emphasize their pastness. But Victoria Glendinning in her fine biography of Jonathan Swift modernized the spelling and explained why in the preface: “Period flavor can be just too intrusively flavorsome. You might object that this is as perverse as saying ‘Hold the mayo’ when ordering lobster mayonnaise. But I would rather give proper attention to the lobster.”

What succeeds and what fails can be a subjective judgment. *Wolf Hall*, by Hilary Mantel, is written almost entirely in period details in close-up, a bold experiment that works for some readers but not for me. Striving for immediacy, the novel is all present-tense moments with the context deliberately left out. What remains is a brilliant, woozy, Joycean surface of robust prose, but the novel often feels like it’s all lobster mayonnaise with no lobster. To take one example, a boy named Tom is brutally beaten by his father in the first pages. We never learn why. “Blood from the gash on his head – which was his father’s first effort – is trickling across his face. Add to this, his left eye is blinded; but if he squints sideways, with his right eye he can see that the stitching of his father’s boot is unraveling. The twine has sprung clear of the leather, and a hard knot in it has caught his eyebrow and opened another cut.”

In the next chapter a man named Thomas serves a cardinal. Only the twenty-year difference in the dates of the chapter headings suggests the boy has become the man. Unlike Gabriel García Márquez, Mantel includes dates; without them the reader would be completely lost. But this isn’t dream history like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It’s a complicated tale of conspiracy and power under Henry VIII; we need to know what’s going on. Thomas is Thomas Cromwell; the cardinal is Cardinal Wolsey. Soon the cardinal is expelled from his palace, but we don’t learn why – his failure to annul Henry’s marriage to his first wife – for another sixty pages. It helps if the reader knows the history or has at least seen *A Man for All Seasons*, but even then all is confusion and chaos. There’s no room to breathe or to feel any emotion. The reader learns nothing new about history or human nature. Bad men are bad. The masses are fickle. It’s the anti-*Man for All Seasons* and Thomas More is a nasty shit, but I already knew that

from an excellent biography, *Thomas More*, by Richard Marius, which tells the story much better. (Marius shows that the man who was celebrated for being willing to die for his beliefs was also a persecutor of heretics who was willing to kill for those beliefs as well, a harder concept for modern readers.)

I wonder if Mantel's frantic, flashy style is the best way to tell the story – and there are still two more volumes to go. Nevertheless, the book became a best seller. Well, some readers enjoy feeling dizzy, as if after a stiff drink. And it's heady, brutal stuff, a *Game of Thrones* for highbrows. But compare *Wolf Hall* with *The Fifth Queen*, by Ford Madox Ford, a trilogy written almost a hundred years earlier, before Ford wrote *The Good Soldier*. Also set in the reign of Henry VIII, but a few queens farther down the road, Ford's novel likewise features Thomas Cromwell, but in a secondary role. It too is full of Shakespearean dialogue, dense prose, and striking details, but Ford regularly mixes long shots and medium shots with his close-ups so readers always know where they are. It may be slightly more old-fashioned than *Wolf Hall*, but I find it more accessible. And his details open windows into the characters, their age and their beliefs. Mantel's details open windows only on her own virtuosity. (The later TV adaptation of *Wolf Hall* is more accessible than the book since the frantic, flashy prose is gone, but all we get is a pokey, smoky costume drama full of gloomy actors muttering their lines with downcast eyes.)

Talk of details brings us to the role of facts in narrative history – or what some people call “truth.” In nonfiction, things need to be true, of course. You can change emphasis or interpretation, but you cannot claim that the Battle of the Little Bighorn took place on a date other than June 25, 1876, or that Custer won and Sitting Bull was killed. You can't present as fact a conversation that is totally invented.

But in fiction it's more slippery. Here there's enormous pleasure in making up stuff and convincing the reader it's real. There's the authority that comes with voice and surprise. The big boogeyman in fiction is anachronism, the wrong detail that can break the dream and throw us out of the narrative, but this is more subjective than it might seem. For example, a fluorescent light in a 1939 working-class home on the second page of *The Amazing Adven-*

*tures of Cavalier and Clay*, by Michael Chabon, will startle only readers who happen to know that fluorescent lights didn't become cheap and commonplace until after World War II. First chapters are important because the reader is not yet so caught up in the story that he or she doesn't notice wrong notes. A strong narrative can sweep us past a host of trivial errors. And errors are inevitable. Writers can't always distinguish commonplace devices and language of time past from those of their own age. Yet these errors aren't as serious or destructive as many fear. It's all make-believe, anyway. Writers just hope we're not so off base that we break the dream.

A more profound anachronism is the fallacy of "presentism," the assumption that the past is just like the present and the inner lives of humans remain the same from one century to the next. The past really is a foreign country. No writer can underestimate the rigid roles of race, class, and gender in other eras. Nobody can forget the hardness of life in the past or the power of religion. But I believe that it's equally wrong, and dangerous, to treat other ages as completely other. If that were true, we'd be unable to feel any connection with Greek tragedies or Shakespeare's plays or even Victorian novels. They would be opaque mysteries to us.

I believe that the past is different but similar enough for us to see ourselves reflected there, like a funhouse mirror where our experience and psychology are duplicated with fresh proportions, revealing distortions, and strange expressive shapes. We see ourselves new in the funhouse mirror of history.