Wisconsin Death Trip

MICHAEL LESY

WITH A PREFACE BY WARREN SUSMAN

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Preface

Writing over a hundred years ago, Hippolyte Taine congratulated those fellow historians who had preceded him for making "the first step in history" leading to a "revival of imagination" through a reconstruction of the past, no matter how incomplete, that enabled them to "*see* approximately the men of other days." In a particularly brilliant passage he now urged the taking of "the second step": using what the eye can see, "the visible man," to discover "the man invisible," or that center that is "the genuine man," that

> mass of faculties and feelings which are the inner man. We have reached a new world, which is infinite, because every action which we see involves an infinite association of reasonings, emotions, sensations new and old, which have served to bring it to light, and which, like great rocks deep-seated in the ground, find in it their end and their level. This underworld is a new subject-matter, proper to the historian.[1]

It is in fact that "underworld"—or at least a small part of it —that this book proposes to explore. But in the course of that exploration the author soon discovered (and this he shares with many other creative young thinkers, scholars, and artists of his generation) that the old forms, bequeathed by a great historical tradition developed with enormous skill and energy most especially over the last century, will no longer serve his purposes. The structure of experience that most interests him cannot be captured by the logic of observation, description, or explanation traditionally deployed in the narrative (which tells a story), the monograph (which permits systematic analysis), or even the documentary (which records the "facts").

Many historians have become convinced that there was a major crisis in American life during the 1890s; some have gone so far as to call it a "psychic crisis" and have attempted to explain its existence or, even more commonly, to use the presumed existence of such a crisis as an explanation for a wide series of developments in American domestic and

[1]Hippolyte Taine, *History of English Literature* (New York: John Nurtele Lovell, 1873), p. 19.

international political life. But none of this interests Michael Lesy; his concern is rather with the psychology of a people in a particular time and place. Eschewing the hotter theories or generalizations, he prefers to present what he believes to be the authentic structure of the experience of the people themselves, especially that aspect of the structure that might be regarded as pathological. Again, in common with so many of the ablest of his generation, he wishes us primarily to know "the real thing" firsthand so that we may better understand. His first obligation as an historian, he clearly believes, is to find the patterns and rhythms of lives and to present them in a manner sufficiently artful so that we too sense those patterns and rhythms.

Lesy might have opted for a method more in tune with the modes of behavioral analysis now commonplace in history and the social sciences, more particularly, the gathering of data about types of human behavior readily quantifiable so that a series of statistically valid correlations might have been attempted. In point of fact, he has not failed to investigate, and make use of, some of the kinds of records commonly consulted by such behaviorists. But he realized that there were other kinds of behavior—in language and gesture, in persistent images preserved in newspapers and other written accounts, and perhaps most significantly in those extraordinary visual images captured by a local photographer. Not only are these kinds of behavior crucial for what we can come to know about Taine's "inner man" by interpreting them, but they take on special meaning when we realize that the record of this behavior was not simply an accidental accounting left for the historians of the future but in fact represents—especially in the photographs, newspapers, personal documents —the kind of record these people wished to preserve (itself an important type of behavior) *for themselves*.

For at the very time that the Frontier Myth or the vision of a happier agrarian America was reaching its apogee (witness Turner's classic essay of 1893) there was also a growing awareness of awesome problems of death, decline, delinquency, and even degeneracy as phenomena associated not only with industrial and urban America but with rural and agrarian America as well. It is this consciousness that Lesy demonstrates. Many historians have concerned themselves with American aspirations and hopes; few with its fears and nightmares. Lesy offers us a unique opportunity to face not the American Dream but the American Nightmare, a nightmare reflected not only in the mind but in other kinds of behavior as well. It is this general phenomenon and not a set of abstract ideas that attracts his particular method of inquiry.

That method of inquiry is certainly not traditional in the historical literature. It reminds me, if only by loose analogy to be sure, of Hannah Arendt's description of the method of Walter Benjamin in her brilliant introduction to his series of critical and historical essays, *Illuminations*. In discussing one of Benjamin's more important works, Arendt says, "The main work consisted in tearing fragments out of their context and arranging them afresh in such a way that they illustrated one another and were able to prove their *raison d'être* in a free-floating state, as it were. It definitely was a sort of surrealistic montage." Benjamin's ideal, we are told, was to produce a work consisting entirely of quotations. In a sense, this was Lesy's original objective also, although he proposed to use another kind of quotation than presumably Benjamin had in mind and added to the very idea of quotations the use of "photographic quotations," selected images "quoted" from a remarkable body of photographic record. Arendt continues her explanation of Benjamin's intentions as follows:

> To the extent that an accompanying text by the author proved unavoidable, it was a matter of fashioning it in such a way as to preserve "the intention of such investigation," namely, "to plumb the depths of language and thought. . . . by drilling rather than excavating" so as not to ruin everything with explanations that seek to provide a causal or systematic connection. In doing so Benjamin was quite aware that this new method of "drilling" resulted in a certain "forcing of insights. . . . whose inelegant pedantry, however, is preferable to today's almost universal habit of falsifying them"; it was equally clear to him that this method was bound to be "the cause of certain obscurities." What mattered to him above all was to avoid anything that might be reminiscent of empathy, as though a given subject of investigation had a message in readiness which easily communicated itself, or could be communicated, to the reader or spectator.[2]

It may seem perverse of me to relate *Wisconsin Death Trip* to Taine's masterpiece of the 1860s or the provocative achievements of Benjamin in the 1920s and 1930s, but I do so deliberately, if only to welcome a new and imaginative young historian whose initial work offers what appear to me fruitful beginnings and yet whose origins, perhaps unknown even to him, relate him intellectually to a long tradition of striving to know and to understand by a willingness to see things anew. In his own very different way, Lesy has his American predecessors too. My own reading of his book constantly called to mind the classic essay by Dr. Benjamin Rush written at the end of the eighteenth century, "The Influence of Physical Causes Upon the Moral Faculty." In that piece, Rush diagnosed a disease, Micronomia, "the partial or weakened action of the moral faculty"; he called the total absence of that faculty Anomia. The situation Lesy demonstrates, I would suggest, might easily be designated by more modern sociologists as anomic, and even Rush's detailing of the role of certain "physical causes" might readily suggest themselves (climate, hunger, silence, etc.). While reading Lesy's book, it is hardly easy to put aside Rush's warning that "it is of the utmost consequence to keep young people as ignorant as possible of those crimes that are generally thought most disgraceful to human nature. Suicide, I believe, is often propagated by means of newspapers."[3]

Indeed, Rush's psychologizing—primitive as it may be regarded—might still prove itself more "acceptable" than some of Lesy's efforts in that direction. But if that is true, why didn't Rush's hopes prevail, that education, pulpit, government, and men of science could overcome other environmental problems that might lead to Anomia? Lesy's work—suffering as it does from some confusions, laboring as many pioneer works do under serious methodological difficulties—has shaped the structure of those aspects of the Wisconsin experience of the 1890s that he has selected in such a way that we can never look at our past as before but rather are now forced to raise new questions: about the fascination with

[2] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), pp. 47–48. The quotations in the last extract are from Benjamin's own work.

[3] Benjamin Rush, "The Influence of Physical Causes Upon the Moral Faculty," in *The Writings of Benjamin Rush*, ed. Dagobert D. Runes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), p. 206.

death and the morbid, with suicide and murder, about consciousness of decline and degeneracy, about attitudes toward sex and the family. What does the horror of fire—what appears to be an obsessive horror—mean? Is it a natural response to natural problems in the environment or does it signify something beyond this? What are we to make of the constant theme of money (especially the lack of it) or religious piety (especially the excess of it) in the most generally held views about the cause of mental breakdown or suicide or murder?

Where Lesy has not succeeded, his relative failure is the consequence of his daring and his very daring ought to add a dimension to historical understanding. Taine had urged: "Let us make our past present; in order to judge of a thing, it must be before us; there is no experience to what is absent."[4] Lesy has achieved this objective and in so doing provided us, in his method, his special sources, and his use of them, a consciousness of a territory still unexplored. The result is a serious historical work that must be taken seriously. For Lesy has done what Taine proposed when he suggested the time had come for historians to take "the second step"; he has taken that step. It now remains as a challenge for the rest of us to see where further we can all go in some of the directions in which he has pointed us.

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[4]Taine, *History of English Literature*, p. 19.

Introduction

The pictures you're about to see are of people who were once actually alive. The excerpts you're about to read recount events these people, or people like them, once experienced. None of the accounts are fictitious. Neither the pictures nor the events were, when they were made or experienced, considered to be unique, extraordinary, or sensational. The pictures were taken by a careful, competent town photographer named Charles Van Schaick; they are artful only in so far as he obeyed the most prosaic conventions of portraiture. The events were recorded by a father named Frank Cooper, and a son named George, who were equally competent, equally careful, equally experienced town newspaper editors; their articles are imaginative only in so far as they conformed to the inevitable demands of space and time dictated by a weekly paper. The people who looked at the pictures once they were taken weren't surprised, and the people who read about the events after they were printed weren't shocked. They preserved the pictures and the newspapers for the same reason that some people remember their birthdays, and others fail to notice each breath.

All the inhalations and all the exhalations were crystallized in silver emulsion on 30,000 glass plate negatives, and all the birthdays with all their best wishes were transferred to the fibers and inks of good rag paper. The glass plates were left to sit by themselves for thirty years after Van Schaick died. Occasionally, a lower lip or the whole side of a face would crack off and break away like the side of a glacier. Often the edge of a cornice or the crest of a hill would disintegrate into flakes the size of silica sand. The stacks of glass broke because of their own weight; their emulsions decayed because of too much or too little moisture. Twenty years of the common but multivariate life of a county seat, now transformed into images composed of elementary chemical ciphers, sat enclosed by the space of one dry and dusty four-walled and ceilinged room, and fell prey not to irony, not to remorse, and not to forgetfulness, but to vectors of force and the molecular composition of the air.

The newspapers were treated differently. Since they came from a county seat whose press had begun to operate nearly as soon as its plats were surveyed, each issue was reduced to the size of a stamp by technicians who had no time to notice anything but the title and date of each brittle paper rectangle they placed underneath the copy lights of their cameras. Two years, 104 issues, 300 accusations, 200 denials, 600 messages, 40 rumors, 3 declarations, and 2,000 factual recitations were wound around a spool, and the spool was sent to a reading room. The library assistants rarely even looked at each spool; rather they verified it by its weight, and then catalogued it by the place of its origin, the date of its publication, and the positive and negative nature of its photographic exposure. They stacked twenty years of the prose style of a father and his son on top of twenty years of ghost stories, epidemics, political careers, suicides, sales, insanities, bankruptcies, burnings, medical testimonials, and early deaths, and then they stacked them all somewhere in a gray metal drawer that slid vertically from its file bank like a radiator on casters. Twenty years of symbiotic exchanges between a system of social economics and the permutations and fruitions of 3,000 randomly assembled genetic patterns were catalogued and filed by library assistants employed on eight-month contracts to preside over the roaring silence of facts and lies that preceding assistants and technicians had been instructed and trusted to accumulate.

The 30,000 glass plates were all that was left of the records of flesh Charley Van Schaick had made between 1890 and 1910. The spools of microfilm were all that remained of the stories the Coopers had passed along over those same twenty years while the whole country teeter-tottered across the greatest time gap of its history. Since Charley used plates from St. Louis that permitted half-second exposures, he could take pictures of anything whenever the sun was out just so long as it didn't move any faster than a slow walk. Because the Coopers subscribed to state and national wire services, they were able to reprint dispatches from Cuba and St. Petersburg, as well as anecdotes from La Crosse and Prairie du Chien. Both Charley and the Coopers got paid for their records; they got paid for showing people what they'd already seen or for telling them what they'd already heard. Neither Van Schaick nor the Coopers were artists: they were businessmen with few pretensions. They were different from their customers only because they'd renounced their own lives so that they might record others. They didn't question events; they confirmed them. Eventually they may have become particularly sensitive to appearances, but they never doubted their meanings. Charley took hundreds and hundreds of pictures of horses because he was asked to; he took dozens and dozens of pictures of houses and their owners because he'd been offered the job. The Coopers vilified the Pullman strikers because everyone was Republican; they noted a departure, an arrival, or a visit because everyone always departed, arrived, or visited; they devoted a weekly column to abstinence because it was a Christian duty to remain temperate. Each of them said yes to what he was supposed to and no to what he was supposed to refuse. They were prosaic chroniclers of a conventionalized universe.

But something happened. Something changed. Somehow, sometime, somewhere in the middle of the time gap this country moved through, everything became different. It wasn't only that the demographic ratios of rural and urban populations changed. It wasn't only that the country became industrialized. It wasn't even that we left the nineteenth century running like a bunch of punks who'd rolled some drunk spic in an alley for a couple of islands and an isthmus and that, by the time we showed up in the twentieth century, we'd turned into a crowd of middle-aged, Protestant philanthropists ready to set up European trust funds for semi-solvent but self-determined nations—it wasn't quite that. What was strange was that in the seventy years between then and now, in the time it takes a healthy man to live, learn a few lessons, grow old, and die—in that short time, in one lifetime, all of Charly's pictures and all of the Coopers' newspapers were changed from the most ordinary records of the most ordinary events into arcane remnants, obscure relics, antique mementos. What dark thing had changed the ordinary doings of ordinary citizens into messages received by radio telescope from a nebula judged to have exploded a million years ago? How did it happen? Why did it happen?

Of Van Schaick's 30,000 images, only 3,000 were initially selected by an experienced archivist to be of such visual and thematic interest to warrant preservation. Of these, I judged less than 200 to contain sufficient information to answer those questions about the changes at the end of the century. Of the ten years of the *Badger State Banner*, I examined only state, county, and town news items, and of these, I concentrated only on the stories and accounts that concerned the psychology or personality of events. The final text was composed of five types of people talking at once, sometimes about the same things, like witnesses to an accident, sometimes about different things, like the chroniclers of a court history. The major voice that drones throughout the ten years of loss and disaster—cold, sardonic, and clear, like black marble—belongs to Frank Cooper. His blocks of prose are veined here and there by the acute, sensual style of a novelist like Glenway Wescott, or the refined, cameralike writing of Hamlin Garland. In turn, their art is balanced by the clinical sterility and disavowal of a medical records keeper at the state madhouse, and his frigidity is redeemed by the voices and words of two mythical creatures, one the easy, well-cooked understandings of a local historian and the other the crisp, bone-close insights of a town gossip. Together these five real and mythical voices sing a polyphony that flows about the ten years like sand and gravel raked around boulders in a courtyard. Their words are not so much written as sounded, not so much casual as descriptive, not so much chronological as inclusive. Together they speak not so much of sequential changes as variations in images of acceptance and denial. The text that is formed from their words is arranged year by year only so that your inner ear may pause and remember all that it has heard, and prepare for the alternations to come.

The text was constructed as music is composed. It was meant to obey its own laws of tone, pitch, rhythm, and repetition. Even though now, caught between the two covers of this book, it accompanies the pictures, it was not meant to serve them the way a quartet was intended to disguise the indecorous pauses in eighteenth-century gossip. Rather, it was meant to fill the space of this book with a constantly repeated theme that might recall your attention whenever it drifted from the faces and hands of the people in the pictures. These photographs were arranged according to their nature as both records made to order and aesthetic objects created by insight. No matter how prosaic a photographer Van Schaick was, he still practiced an art based upon compressions and elisions; he still presided over archetypal images that were originally created at the secret heart of this culture as silently and thoughtlessly as the blink of an eye. For these reasons, I thought his pictures were less like pieces of wood that could be nailed to a prose framework than like colors that had to be poured, and that once poured, once combined, formed their own container and filled it with shades of meaning and emotion.

Van Schaick's pictures were arranged in five primary sequences. The introductory and concluding series are highly compressed summaries: they have to do with being born and dying young, with living either together or alone, and with ending well or badly. The middle three series have to do with the lives of women and men, and how they changed, separated, and united over time. Throughout these sequences, I have inserted pictures that Van Schaick would never have made. The insertions were intended to emphasize emotions or elaborate meanings contained by his original pictures. Such additions and variations of images are in a certain way similar to the additions made to the Coopers' newspaper accounts. All were made so that text and photographs might suggest certain abstract ideas not only about the town of Black River Falls, county of Jackson, state of Wisconsin, but about the entire region and era in which the town, county, and state were enmeshed. The insertions and additions were rationalized in this way: the only way to go against a photographer's intentions is to destroy his negatives; the only way to falsify a newspaperman's point of view is to forget what he said. Whether or not Charley or the Coopers knew all their own intentions, they're there anyway, locked into their compositions and their sentence structures, and nothing but a hammer or a hot fire is ever going to change them. The only problem is how to change a portrait back into a person and how to change a sentence back into an event. Van Schaick never thought his plates would end up in an archive's negative-file, and the Coopers never imagined their paper would end up on film. The thing to worry about is meanings, not appearances.

There are two final things you should know before you begin to look and read. One has to do with the pictures; the other with the accounts. You should first know that none of the pictures were snapshots, that their deepest purpose was more religious than secular, and that commercial photography, as practiced in the 1890s, was not so much a form of applied technology as it was a semimagical act that symbolically dealt with time and mortality. Knowing this, you should understand that there was a direct link between photography and the presence of such epidemic diseases as diphtheria, smallpox, and cholera. These diseases were awful and perverse not only because they paralyzed and destroyed whole countries, but because they inverted a natural order—that is, they killed the youngest before the oldest; they killed the ones who were to be protected before their rightful protectors; they killed the progeny before the forebears; they killed the children before their parents. When such diseases created circumstances of fate so grotesque, so perverse that they permitted parents to outlive their infants, they permitted them to live on not only in grief but in guilt, since it was they who had failed to preserve their bloodline; it was they who had failed to maintain the immortality of their genes.

You should know a second thing, before you read the accounts: these writings transformed what were private acts into public events. In a time that was disjointed by a depression as epidemically fatal and grotesque as the most contagious disease, these articles created temporary but intimate bonds between creatures who had been separated and divided by a selfish culture of secular Calvinism. These accounts permitted people to share their misery by turning strangers into relatives. They attributed and articulated the motives of the most secret and private of undertakings, the act of suicide, and so permitted desperate people to be solaced by others' despair. These accounts turned grief inside out; they turned murderous sorrow outward toward the eyes of a crowd that could not only comfort it, but, by participating in it, could be immunized against it. Such weekly articles and notices served purposes similar to those of commercial photography: they were symbolic ways of dealing with an inhuman fate that made some men helpless by making them suddenly and inexplicably poor, and that drove some women mad with grief and remorse by quickly killing their children.

This book is an exercise in historical actuality, but it has only as much to do with history as the heat and spectrum of the light that makes it visible, or the retina and optical nerve of your eye. It is as much an exercise of history as it is an experiment of alchemy. Its primary intention is to make you experience the pages now before you as a flexible mirror that if turned one way can reflect the odor of the air that surrounded me as I wrote this; if turned another, can project your anticipations of next Monday; if turned again, can transmit the sound of breathing in the deep winter air of a room of eighty years ago, and if turned once again, this time backward on itself, can fuse all three images, and so can focus who I once was, what you might yet be, and what may have happened, all upon a single point of your imagination, and transform them like light focused by a lens on paper, from a lower form of energy to a higher.