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## *History for Life: Simms and Nietzsche Compared*

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*Literature  
makes lessons  
of history  
meaningful.*

In his biography of William Gilmore Simms John C. Guilds says of his subject that he had “a special fondness for history” and was, in Guilds’s view at least, “the only American author of the nineteenth century to envision, design, initiate, and consummate an epic portrayal of the development of our nation.”<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere Guilds says that “Simms’s fullest expression of the relationship between history and art is found in the essay entitled *The Epochs and Events of American History, as Suited to the Purposes of Art in Fiction*.” He goes on to say that Simms’s theory of art “puts history in the forefront as the subject for literature” while his theory of history “makes literature the only true medium through which the accomplishments and lessons of history are made meaningful to man.” In brief, for Simms, there is a unity of history and art and thus “[t]he scholar who wishes to understand a people or an age must reach and understand the poet-philosophers (i.e. the historical romancers) of that people and age.”<sup>2</sup> These remarks on the demands that the craft of history makes on the historian to arrive at the fullest possible self-exposure to the thought and art of the period being studied and re-created remind us forcefully of remarks on the

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<sup>1</sup> John C. Guilds, *Simms: A Literary Life* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1992), 333.

<sup>2</sup> John C. Guilds, “Simms’s Use of History: Theory and Practice,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 4 (1977): 506.

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same subject made by Friedrich Nietzsche. Thus it is my purpose in this article to discuss the balance of similarities and differences between Simms and Nietzsche on the question of historiography. In so doing I would hope to bring the American-“Romantic” and the Continental-“Modern” understandings of the meaning and nature of the “historical sense” into the same field of vision. To this end I propose to focus on the second section of the work pointed to by Guilds and on the second of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations* known best in the English-speaking world as “The Use and Abuse of History.”

It is not a frequent thing for William Gilmore Simms to be associated with the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. The differences between the two nineteenth-century writers are evident enough. But A. J. Conyers in discussing Simms’s theological views notes that, while Simms “may not have admired the styles of Christianity he found in its formal expression,” he certainly “did not go as far as his younger contemporary Nietzsche, who said ‘in reality there is only one Christian and he died on the cross.’” Nevertheless Conyers quotes lines from Simms—“ay better thousand times to be, the pagan on some Sodomitic shore”<sup>3</sup>—to indicate Simms’s attitude to “positive” or institutional Christianity.

*Simms and Nietzsche rarely compared.*

Such an observation goes some way towards setting the tone for the discussion that follows linking Simms and Nietzsche on history. Nietzsche is famous for his *Antichrist* which was his great attempt to lay the Christian religion to waste, and there is certainly nothing comparable in Simms. But, if Simms was a Christian, “what kind of a Christian was he?” asks David Aiken. Aiken notes that Simms “was aware of the Higher and Lower Biblical criticism of his day” and that Simms was held back from any serious intention of taking on the Pulpit by his conviction that the New Testament was “However true and good, & wise & pure in many things, a wonderfully corrupt narrative.” So even though he wishes to make the case that Simms was at bottom a Christian Aiken must acknowledge that at the least he was “no conventional Christian.”<sup>4</sup>

*Simms “no conventional Christian.”*

I shall argue that, although Simms “certainly did not go as far as his younger contemporary Nietzsche” in arguing for the writ-

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<sup>3</sup> A. J. Conyers, “Simms’s Incarnational Theology and the Emerging American Religion,” *Southern Quarterly* 41: 2 (2003): 87.

<sup>4</sup> David Aiken, “A Christian in Search of Religious Freedom,” *Southern Quarterly* 41: 2 (2003): 97, 93.

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*Devotion to historical factuality may have hurt Simms's art.*

ing of history as at one and the same time the supreme artistic and supreme political act, still, he went a considerable way in that direction. One thing we should note at the outset is the importance to Simms of his vocation as a historian. This point is made strongly by C. Hugh Holman. Holman says that if one places Simms's Francis Marion "beside the Elizabeth or Mary of Scots or James I or Louis XI of Sir Walter Scott, the figure of Marion reveals how completely Simms felt the restraint of history." Indeed, Holman says, "everything present in the Revolutionary romances has a recognizable parallel in method in the Waverley Novels, except for the chilling restraint with which Simms handled history." Holman's conclusion is that if Simms had been willing "to free himself from the harsh bondage of fact" his books "would not suffer so greatly from unevenness of dramatic tone and impact."<sup>5</sup> So we can rest assured that Simms was as much an "empirical" historian as he was fictionalizer and certainly was no simple fabulist. In the view of some he might have taken the factual side of history with more seriousness than was good for his art.

*One of genius's "noblest executions" to show that individuals can affect their own destiny.*

Holman also makes an important point for Simms's relationship to Nietzsche when he notes that Simms was keenly aware of the fatalism or determinism implicit in Scott's novels. Scott's characters are active but at the same time "helpless participants in occurrences beyond their control." Scott's stories "are finally shaped by the iron mould of history."<sup>6</sup> The point here is that Simms accepted that "genius" cannot distort or reshape history that is well known to all. But at the same time he saw it as part of "genius's" "noblest executions" to show the human will at work and how individuals can have an impact on their own destiny at some basic level. It is important for the historical artists to show that individuals can master history rather than for it to be eternally the other way around.

But if Holman portrays Simms as under the severe "restraint of history," Jon L. Wakelyn argues for the essentially propagandistic nature of much of Simms's work. The fourth chapter of Wakelyn's book on Simms is in fact entitled "Historical Propagandist." Wakelyn says that Simms "was formulating a view of history which called for the historian to be a special pleader for a cause, to write

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<sup>5</sup> C. Hugh Holman, "The Influence of Scott and Cooper on Simms," *American Literature* 23 (1951): 212, 218.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

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history as propaganda.”<sup>7</sup> Wakelyn seems to be saying that Simms has to be rated a “propagandist” because he is “philosophic” or “artistic” in the way he treats of historical subjects. Wakelyn says of Simms that he was “[d]edicated and myopic to the end,” and “died as he had lived, in a romantic haze of his own propaganda of self-deception.”<sup>8</sup> But in what some might term the most “offensive” work in the light of contemporary values—“The Morals of Slavery”—an essay which to be sure was clearly designed to defend the South’s sectional interest, we find Simms beginning his discussion not with a concern that the South never be criticized but that the truth be known. “We should labor in her [truth’s] assistance,” Simms says, “not by persuasive and specious doctrines, and fine flexible sayings, but simply by a firm adherence to what we know, and to what we think we have already gained.”

As yet, we have, confessedly, but partial glimmerings of her divine presence . . . [but] if we gather, each, but a single shell from the great centre of truth . . . we shall at least diminish the toils of those who shall follow in our own footsteps along the shores of the same solitary and unknown regions.<sup>9</sup>

So if we take Simms even slightly at his own word we find he is not constructing a simply ideological account of the South’s sectional interest, or “propagandizing” for his vested interests, but is engaged in a quest for truth, which he calls a “divine presence.” Simms might have had his “biases” and he certainly might have been entirely wrong, but this is something different from being guilty of deliberately coloring the facts and making falsifiable statements for the sake of some sub-rational, sub-philosophical interest to which he has given his prior allegiance over the truth, as it may be known to human reason.

Kevin Collins provides a useful counterfoil to the case of Wakelyn by focusing on the tendencies to “realism” in Simms’s fiction. In doing so he also contributes to a justification of the Simms-Nietzsche link. He portrays Simms as on his way to “realism” in his novel *The Cassique of Kiawah*. In this work Simms’s characters are neither “wholly heroic” nor “wholly villainous” and instead of judging between characters who are “paragons of good and

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<sup>7</sup> Jon L. Wakelyn, *The Politics of a Literary Man: William Gilmore Simms* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1973), 119..

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>9</sup> William Gilmore Simms, “The Morals of Slavery,” *Southern Quarterly Review* 16 (1850): 156.

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Though a romanticist, Simms presaged "what would become the conventions of realism."

evil" the reader must come to understand characters who are "equivalents in terms of . . . their moral codes." We need scarcely add that it was Nietzsche's boast to have "danced over morality" into a zone which is "Beyond Good and Evil" and that he considered this overcoming of romanticism in his thinking his greatest achievement. Collins is willing to allow that Simms "remained a romanticist until his death." Nevertheless he thinks that "as his career progressed [he] began more and more to presage what would become the conventions of realism." Speaking of William Dean Howells, Henry James and such like, Collins notes that, "Though realism was perhaps an inevitable response to the social conditions and scientific developments of the later nineteenth century as well as to an historical perspective that allowed them to critique romanticism while decades removed from its heyday, Simms had none of these advantages in 1859."<sup>10</sup> Such a remark serves to isolate the difference in perspective between Simms and Nietzsche as the latter was indeed born about four decades after the former. What was a trickle in Simms, a few decades later had become a torrent in Nietzsche. We conclude that although there are wide differences between the American historical novelist and the German philosopher or "psychologist" (as Nietzsche would say of himself), there can be little doubt that at the same time there is also a kinship between the two. This should become very evident in connection with the question of the role of history in its relation to culture.

To begin, we observe a remarkable resemblance between the title of the second subsection of Simms's *The Epochs and Events of American History*,<sup>11</sup> which he calls "The True Uses of History," and the second and most famous of Friedrich Nietzsche's four *Untimely Meditations* (1874) entitled "*Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*," usually translated as "The Use and Abuse of History."<sup>12</sup> We are struck immediately by the fact that both thinkers discuss history as something that can be "used" or as a "tool"

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<sup>10</sup> Kevin Collins, "Experiments in Realism: Doubling in Simms's *The Cassique of Kiawah*," *Southern Literary Journal* (2002): 3, 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> This essay was developed for lectures before the Historical Society of the State of Georgia.

<sup>12</sup> The title of this particular meditation of the four "*Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*," or "Untimely One," as Nietzsche himself would call it, has been translated in any number of ways, such as "The Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life" or "History in the Service and Disservice of Life" or "The Utility and Liability of History." For convenience's sake I shall keep the traditional "The Use and Abuse of History."

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to certain ends. But there is also an uncanny agreement between the two men that the problem for modern man is the pernicious effect of too much “realist” historical knowledge.

Both men of course love history and the story of the human past as part of their general philanthropy or love of man.<sup>13</sup> But precisely because of this philanthropy or “gift-giving spirit,” as Nietzsche would call it, they are troubled by the choking avalanche of historical information that is accumulating at a breathtaking rate in the nineteenth century, and which may lead to paralysis and collapse on the truly human or “life-lived” level of existence. For Simms and Nietzsche both, the problem of historical “digestion” or an “excess of history” is key. How will modern man cope with the reductive and “debunking” effects of the vast new reservoirs of more factually accurate knowledge which historical research is producing and which increasingly weighs him down?

Simms’s target in his lecture on “The True Uses of History” is the “Cantabs of our own age” from which we learn that “those exquisite and passionate narratives of Greece and Rome” contain little that is “worthy to be relied on.” We have now learned that these “narratives of soul and sweetness, which have touched our hearts with the truest sympathy and enkindled our spirits with the warmest glow of emulative admiration,” are really the product of “cunning artists” in the form of “eloquent narrators and delicious poets,” who have “dishonestly practiced upon our affections and our credulity, making us very children through the medium of our unsuspecting sympathies.”<sup>14</sup>

But for Simms the issue is not one between those who prefer mythology and looking at the past through “rose colored glasses” and those with a passion for hard, uncompromising truth. Indeed, the more factually accurate or authenticated accounts of the past are repellent precisely to “the most hearty lover of truth.” This claim appears somewhat paradoxical. One might ordinarily think

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<sup>13</sup> In the “Prologue” to *Thus Spake Zarathustra* Nietzsche has the hermit say to the would-be prophet: “You lived in your solitude as in the sea, and the sea carried you. Alas, would you now climb ashore? Alas would you now drag your own body?” Zarathustra answered: “I love man.” *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1966), 11.

<sup>14</sup> William Gilmore Simms, “The Epochs and Events of American History, as Suited to the Purposes of Art in Fiction—Introductory. True Uses of History. Objects of Art. Its Ductility and Universality,” in C. Hugh Holman, ed. *Views and Reviews in American Literature, History and Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1962), 32.

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*To cut man off  
from a history  
pulsing with  
life is to limit  
his future.*

that the lover of truth would be glad to see a more “factual” account. But precisely the opposite is the case for Simms. The “lover of truth” is in some sense a lover of myth because myth, paradoxically enough, conveys more truth than the “facts.” For one thing, the factually oriented form of history must have “authorities” for any assertion of historical knowledge. But for Simms there can be no such thing as “authorities” for historical truth of any real value. The dependence on “authorities” constitutes precisely the limits of the “rigid historian.” He cannot look to “the holiest kinds of truth—the truths of the greatest purpose, the purest integrity, the noblest ambition, the most godlike magnanimity.”<sup>15</sup> The true historian puts “flesh” on the bones of history rather than attempting to animate an articulated skeleton by a form of “moral galvanism.” But inevitably Simms’s true historian will be met by the “decapitative” question from the factualists: “Where are your authorities?” It is in the face of such questions that the artist’s courage must come to the fore. If the artistic creator is to be cowed by the demand for “authorities,” he is finished in his vocation. He has been crushed by “the past” in the sense of being paralyzed by the demand that everything he says be squared with what has been “empirically” verified by the scholars. “Alas! For the genius who fears them!” Simms exclaims. These “pur-blind chroniclers” whose vocation it is to disinter the “marrowless bones of the past” would cut off contemporary man from a past with flesh on it. In so doing they would limit his future. To follow their rules would be to exclude any possibility that the future could be informed by a body of historical knowledge where the vital flesh pulsates on the factual bones.

In this context it is to Barthold Georg Niebuhr as the representative of “scientific history” that Simms addresses himself. Simms expresses admiration for the “coldly inquisitorial” Niebuhr’s achievement and allows that this “sarcastic minister and learned German” is indeed the greatest of all the “professed skeptics of all detail in ancient history.” He has indeed made “a wreck of the imposing structure of ancient history, as it comes to us from the hands of ancient art.” He indeed discovers the “more certainly true,” but whether this is sufficient to compensate for what we have lost is not so obvious to those who have “a better faith in art.” For Simms it is art which is “the greatest of all historians” and art

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<sup>15</sup> “True Uses,” 32.

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is “better deserving of our confidence than that worker who limits his faith entirely to his own discoveries.” In other words, the non-artistic historian can only speak of new facts he has uncovered in his research. He cannot go on to inference, speculation, meditation, reflection—in short “philosophy.” He cannot generalize because he cannot leave the level of “empirical” detail. He is the “victim” of history, or is determined by what he thinks is history, rather than determining it by his creative will or what Nietzsche calls his “creative buoyancy.”<sup>16</sup>

Simms’s final verdict, then, is that “We [should] prefer Livy to a cloud of such witnesses as Niebuhr.”<sup>17</sup> Niebuhr is incapable of seeing that “the chief value of history consists in its proper employment for the purposes of art.”<sup>18</sup> History is “raw material” meant to be employed for “the erection of noble fabrics and lovely forms.” Art employs history so that “the multitude” may be uplifted “into gradual excellence and hope!” It is through art “that the past lives to the counseling and direction of the future, and if she breathe not the breath of life into the nostrils, the wires of the resurrectionist would vainly link together the rickety skeleton which he disinters for posterity.”<sup>19</sup> The future, then, is dependent on the power of the artist to create it, which he does by breathing life into the past and thus giving it in turn the power to “counsel” and “direct” the future. To use a Nietzschean locution here, the artistic historian or historical artist “legislates for mankind.”

Nietzsche says of the Niebuhrian historian that he has learned to answer the question: “How and why is life lived?” for “every man, for every event, whether among the Greeks or the Turks, whether from a day in the first or in the nineteenth century.” From this “supra-historical” vantage point we “no longer feel tempted . . . to go on living or taking part in history.” This is because, once it is recognized that it is the blindness and injustice in the soul of

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<sup>16</sup> Simms is to Niebuhr as Sissy Jupe is to Thomas Gradgrind in Dickens’s *Hard Times* (which no doubt not coincidentally was inscribed to none other than Thomas Carlyle). “In this life, we know nothing but facts sir: nothing but Facts!” Gradgrind says in his “inflexible, dry and dictatorial” voice. When Sissy says she would like pictures of flowers in her carpets, she is told: “You mustn’t fancy . . . You are never to fancy. Fact, fact, fact.” —Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (New York: Signet Classics, 1980), 12, 16.

<sup>17</sup> “True Uses,” 34n.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 34. Simms’s definition of the philosophy of history is a “happy conjecturing, of what might have been from what we know.”

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

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the man of action that is the precondition for historical events' ever taking place we become "cured of taking history too seriously." From the "supra-historical" point of view there is "no redemption [to be had] in the process" because "the world is complete, fully consummated, at every single moment." "What could ten years more teach them that the last ten could not?" Nietzsche asks.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, from the "supra-historical" point of view all history looks like a chaotic mess imperfectly understood by those in it. It has this appearance because the supra-historical historian lives in a world of ordered prosaic facts. To use an analogy from psychology, the love between Romeo and Juliet or between Abelard and Eloise is now known to be a series of biochemical reactions in the lymphatic system and the brain affecting their external conduct. It was no doubt that, yet Simms's and Nietzsche's point would be that only those caught in the raptures of love would be in a position to fully understand what happened between these men and women, which is to say, understand the historical truth about their stories.<sup>21</sup>

What is known finally to the Niebuhrian historian remains a mystery for the individual living and working within the dimension of history itself. By comparison to such an individual the Niebuhrian historian is looking down on a marionette show from behind the stage seeing all the strings which make the puppets dance. But the audience of children at the puppet show forgets the strings and thus sees the puppets as free actors. The man of action is, in this sense, like one of the children at the marionette performance. He, like a child at the show, can imagine getting up on the stage and pushing off one figure or overcoming another. The presupposition of action is a conviction of the possibility that things as they are can be influenced or changed. As Nietzsche puts it, with "historical men" as opposed to historical "scholars," "a glance into the past drives them on toward the future, inflames their courage to go on living, kindles their hope that justice will someday come,

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<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "History in the Service and Disservice of Life" (or "The Use and Abuse of History"), in *Unmodern Observations*, ed. William Arrowsmith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), "Use and Abuse," 92.

<sup>21</sup> In *Hard Times* Bitzer is asked to give "your definition of a horse." Bitzer replies: "Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four eye teeth, plus twelve incisive. Sheds coat in spring etc." Bitzer has no sense that a strong and beautiful animal galloping across the meadow is also part of the "definition" of a horse. *Hard Times*, 14.

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that happiness lies hidden on the other side of the mountain they are approaching."<sup>22</sup> But the Niebuhrian disciple would ultimately take us to a point where the potentially "historical man" would only deal with actual history at the end of a barge-pole while wearing rubber gloves, metaphorically speaking.

Nietzsche's plea with regard to the historian's craft is in essence that of Simms. "If only we could get better at studying history in pursuit of life!"<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche's standpoint is that of Life with a big "L."<sup>24</sup> If we were to successfully study history in a life-enhancing way, then "we could gladly admit to the supra-historical men that they are wiser than we are; that is, if only we could be certain that we have more life than they do. Then in any case, our unwisdom would have more future than their wisdom." In other words, historical scholarship must be guided and controlled by a higher power than itself. It cannot be "turned loose" as Niebuhr turned himself loose on Livy's Rome. "Insofar as it serves life, history serves an unhistorical power, and because of its subordinate function, it could never, and should never, become a pure science like mathematics."<sup>25</sup> That higher power is life itself which is "unhistorical" and is therefore the dimension within which, and not over which, history plays its part. Scientific history is a "death trap" so to speak.

*Historical scholarship must be guided by a higher power than itself.*

So then the supreme contemporary question for modern man to answer, as Nietzsche presents it at least, is the extent to which he has enough life in him to control and guide the historical knowledge available to him. It is the "question of the degree to which life needs the service of history." This question is "of supreme concern because it involves the health of a man, a people, or a culture."

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<sup>22</sup> "Use and Abuse," 93.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>24</sup> "A historical phenomenon which is clearly and thoroughly understood, and which is resolved into a phenomenon of knowledge, is dead to the person who understood it, because he has understood the madness, the injustice, the blind passion, and in general, the whole dismal and earthly horizon of that phenomenon, and thence its historical power too. To the extent that he is a knower, this power has now become powerless in his hands, but to the extent he is still alive, it is not yet powerless." *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* "History, regarded as a purely scientific discipline and accorded supremacy, would resemble a balancing of the books of life and a liquidation of mankind's accounts. On the other hand, if historical scholarship is to be a beneficent enterprise, holding future promise, it must itself move in the wake of a fresh and powerful torrent of life—for instance, a newly emerging culture. History, therefore, must be guided and controlled by a higher power not itself guide and control."

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The key point then is historical “overkill.” The modern mind is simply generating too much history at this point. It is on a high fat, high carbohydrate diet of historical knowledge which is leading to obesity, diabetes, morbidity and death. We must cut down on our historical calorie intake. “There is a certain excess of history that causes life to degenerate and to be destroyed, and through this degeneration, history itself is finally destroyed.”<sup>26</sup>

To be effective  
history must  
be viewed  
imaginatively.

Simms and Nietzsche are in full agreement here. There is no point in multiplying the “number of facts and histories” by adding more details to the careers of more monarchs, etc. Of such details we have “more than enough in possession for all the purposes of moral and human analysis,” Simms says. The problem, as Simms puts it, is that historical details and information obscure nature from view. But man needs access to the natural order for him to live his life fully. Nature “is profligate in the way she expresses herself in humanity’s doings and leaves us nothing to desire in the way of material, whether for conjecture, or philosophy or sympathy.”<sup>27</sup> There may well be a “natural curiosity” to know the names of forgotten kings, but the best response to this passion is not, according to Simms, to go in for what today would be archeological study. Rather it is to hand all our concerns over to the only “genius” who cannot be intimidated by the “huge and shapeless oblivion which presides over a vast proportion of the globe.” Who is this “genius”? His name is “romance and poetry” or “creative art!” This genius will slake our curious thirst and satisfy our doubts about the past accordingly as he deploys his powers.

Simms makes his case via the metaphor of an ancient statue recovered from years of burial underground. Sages and “high priests of civilization and philosophy” may gather around it and assert varying theories as to its genuine origins. But to actually find out whether it was Greek or Roman is not really to know anything about the tale it embodies. It is the poet who interposes his art and “furnishes the perfect history” while the “academic” debate rages onward. In this context Simms turns to Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and exclaims, “What a history is here!—how complete—how true!”<sup>28</sup> Byron puts Rome “in our eyes” with its “equal crime

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> “True Uses,” 35.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 41. The quote is from Canto IV, stanzas cxi and cxli. Bertrand Russell sheds some light on the character of Simms’s thinking when he says that Byron was the “aristocratic rebel.” “The freedom he praised was that of a German Prince or a

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and empire." "Such a history, thus told us, is complete in all its parts. It embodies many histories. Shall we consider it less true because it is attested in the undying measures of verse!" For Simms the "touching truths" of Byron's history in verse would not be affected by exact knowledge of the provenance of the statue. This is because "The moral objects of the poet and historian concern not the individual so much as the race." The objects "are not simply truths of time, but truths of eternity, and can only cease to be truths in the decay of all human sensibilities."<sup>29</sup>

*The moral objects of the poet and the historian "are not simply truths of time, but . . . of eternity."*

In other words, Simms, like Nietzsche, sees art as the life-force which is guiding or controlling historical knowledge, by directing it to the "moral objects" of the human race as a whole, which is to say, something completely unhistorical or immune to change. Like Nietzsche, Simms suggests that a humanity without access to the "truths of eternity" or the experience of the unhistorical, would cease to be fully human—would have its human sensibilities decay—in Nietzsche's terms would "degenerate" or be "destroyed."<sup>30</sup>

For Simms the "record" of the past appeals to more "superior faculties than those of either logic or conscientiousness," and for Nietzsche no ordinary talent will be up to the task which the "excess of history" places before us. To attain to any control or guidance of history requires not only a "loving immersion in empirical data" but above all "a great artistic power," and a "creative buoyancy," which amongst other things allows for "a poetic elaboration of given types." This is what Nietzsche means specifically by "objectivity" of "a positive kind" as distinguished from the bloodless objectivity of the scientific scholar. The thrust of Nietzsche's case is that the practicing historian must live up to his subject rather than look down upon it from the lofty perch of hindsight. It is one thing to have the benefit of hindsight, another thing to be spiritually

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Cherokee Chief, not the inferior sort that might conceivably be enjoyed by ordinary mortals." Bertrand Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1945), 747.

<sup>29</sup> "True Uses," 42.

<sup>30</sup> According to scientific scholarship, Nietzsche says, "only that view of things is true and genuine that is, scientific, which everywhere observes the becoming, the historical element, always ignoring the being element of the eternal. Just as it is inherently opposed to the eternalizing forces of art and religion, so too it abhors all forgetting and the death of knowledge, as it struggles to annihilate every limitation of the horizon and plunges man into that eternally infinite sea of shimmering waves, in the sea of known becoming." "Use and Abuse," 142-143.

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above the personage or character from the past whom one is trying to explain and understand. Those whom Simms would label as “the dull seekers after isolated facts,” Nietzsche calls the “scholars.” But they are the same persons. They invest tremendous labor in unearthing the facts of the past for a “miserable compensation.” But it simply is not enough merely to “come later.” Rather, “As judges you must stand above what you are judging.”<sup>31</sup>

The key question for both Simms and Nietzsche is whether there will be an artistic power of sufficient force and determination to control the “excess of history” and wrest from it that which will serve the enhancement of life and man. For his part Nietzsche hopes “that history may discover that its meaning is not general ideas as the final fruit of its effort, but that its value lies precisely in the spirited retelling, enhancing and heightening of the familiar or even ordinary theme.” It should seek to turn the “everyday tune, into a comprehensive symbol.” In so doing it would intimate that there is “a whole world of profound meaning, power and beauty” in the “original theme.”<sup>32</sup>

“Meaning, power and beauty” then for Nietzsche. What about for Simms? His “three fold triumph” occurs when the historian “crowns his story with a moral, in which truth prevails in the embrace of the beautiful”<sup>33</sup>—the moral, the true and the beautiful.

*“Only from the highest power of the present can you interpret the past.”*

Nietzsche’s italicized point is that “*Only from the highest power of the present can you interpret the past.*” “Only by the most vigorous exertion of your noblest qualities will you sense what in the past is great and worth knowing and preserving. Like for like! Otherwise you drag the past down to your own level.”

In sum, only men of experience and superiority can write history. The man whose experience is not higher and greater than all other men’s cannot understand the greatness and sublimity of the past. The past always speaks with an oracular voice. Only as master builders of the future, who understand the present, will you understand it. . . . By looking ahead, by setting a great goal for yourself, you also master that excessive analytical drive which now devastates your present and makes all calm, all peaceful growth and ripening impossible.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “Use and Abuse,” 117.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> “Review of Prescott’s *Conquest of Peru*,” *Southern Quarterly Review* 13 (1848): 139

<sup>34</sup> “Use and Abuse,” 118.

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Simms is clear on this point, too. The artist is the only “true historian” because he brings the historical character to life via his own natural powers. It is the artist “who endows with life and action, the otherwise motionless automata of history.” Not only that, “the creative faculty” is in fact that human power which allows man “to make himself known to man.” For Simms “romantic art” has a “vital agency” and it is a fact that “many ages and nations are now known only” through the offices of this power.<sup>35</sup> This is because art is the power which enables human beings to hold on to time and to “be sure of the possessions of the past,” which is to say, hold on to time such that he is able to transmit those possessions to the future. “The dull seeker after bald and isolated facts is no philosopher,” Simms says, but merely “a digger.”<sup>36</sup> The creator-artist-historian is something else entirely. He possesses an “active imagination, informed by experience, obeying certain known laws of study, and recognizing, as guiding rules, certain general standards of examination.”<sup>37</sup>

For both Simms and Nietzsche, then, objectivity in the sense of neutrality or indifference is impossible and would be undesirable if it were possible. What horrifies both writers is the professional or scientific historian’s lack of passion. An “absence of feeling and moral strength” is taken to be “a piercing coolness of observation.” There is every chance that the historian’s objectivity could be a cover for the utter want of passion and spirit in his very own soul. But “positive” or desirable objectivity is to be seen in “that imper-turbable calm of the artist’s gaze, inwardly flashing but outwardly dark and impassive,” and this differs radically from “an affectation of calm.” Nietzsche says:

In some cases banality of mind, that vulgar wisdom, which solely by virtue of its own boredom creates the impression of disinterested calm, sallies forth disguised as that artistic state of mind in which the subject becomes silent and disappears from sight altogether. Then there is the effort to suppress everything that might excite, and the driest word is precisely the right word. Indeed, it is even thought that a man to whom a past moment *is of no concern whatever* has a vocation to describe it.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> “True Uses,” 47.

<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche transforms this term “digger” into the “gravedigger” whose research digs graves for the characters of the past. *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> “True Uses,” 36-37. “It is by such artists that nations live. It is the soul of art, alone, which binds periods and places together.”

<sup>38</sup> “Use and Abuse,” 117.

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Objective  
history  
“of little  
importance  
to mankind.”

In a similar spirit, Simms insists that “objective history” would be “of little importance to mankind.” “[D]ry, sapless history can tell us nothing, which can tell us nothing more!” Sitting among the ruins of Carthage “each man becomes his own historian.”<sup>39</sup> Which is to say, without the creative artist/historian as an intermediary mediating between the past and the present, there is no history properly so called. There are only the items observable to the individual person in the present, as they appear to him and as he may or may not accurately remember them. It is the historian which gives Carthage a history, and therefore gives “more than a purely personal existence to everyman.” According to Simms, the best historical method involves “[r]easoning of what should have been from what is before us.” It is from the “probable” that we gather the “true.” In the light of these considerations the dates and names of “the mere chronologists” are “nothing.” The Simmsian historian is busy “tracing hopes and fears, feelings and performances.” He is searching for “the greatness which was, and the glories which exist no longer.” He does not wish to be held up by “some cold and impertinent querist” who “forbids our inquiry as idle” if we cannot be precise as to names and dates. Simms is categorical here: “History itself is only valuable when it . . . awakes noble affections,—elicits generous sentiments,—and stimulates into becoming activity the intelligence which it informs!”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> In his use of this phrase Simms is pointing in the direction of the great twentieth-century historian Carl Becker. Becker says in his famous address to the American Historical Association of 1931: “Normally the memory of Mr. Everyman, when he awakens in the morning, reaches out into the country of the past and of distant places and instantaneously recreates his little world of endeavor, pulls together as it were things said and done in his yesterdays, and coördinates them with his present perceptions and with things to be said and done in his to-morrows. Without this historical knowledge, this memory of things said and done, his to-day would be aimless and his to-morrow without significance.” Thus the individual. Thus the nation. *Everyman His Own Historian* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966), 235-36.

<sup>40</sup> “True Uses,” 36. “Most of [the historians who live in democratic ages] attribute hardly any influence to the individual over the destiny of the race, or to citizens over the fate of a people . . . . When . . . all the citizens are independent of one another, and each of them is individually weak, no one is seen to exert a great or still less a lasting power over the community . . . . [These historians] are wrong in wholly denying the special influence of individuals because they cannot easily trace or follow it.” Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols. (New York: Vintage Books, 1945), 2: 90-92. Obviously it was Carlyle’s intention to cut against the grain of the tendencies Tocqueville was describing, and we know how much of an influence Carlyle was on Simms. “Show our critics a great man . . . [and they say] “[T]he time called him forth, the time did everything, he nothing . . . . Such small

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Given his true vocation, the true historian must claim certain “privileges,” privileges which he would rather forgo than pursue the enterprise without. These privileges include those of “heaping conjecture upon conjecture, identifying facts with their classes, tracing concealed character though a long series of details, educating causes from associated results, and tracing upward, step by step, by plausible suggestions, the several policies by which nations are built up and made famous or overthrown and dismembered.”<sup>41</sup> For Simms, history is a living thing and the true historian is “the sort of genius” who “learns to speak with a familiar confidence of his subject.”

*The true historian's imagination takes part with his judgment, officers and counsels his thought.*

His imagination takes part with his judgment, officers and counsels his thought, wings it to the desired fact, and vividly portrays to the mind's eye the hero and the event. Thence he becomes a limner, a painter, a creator; and the picture glows beneath his hand, and the drama dilates in action under his glance, and he becomes a living and authentic witness to the past, and of all the circumstance she has undertaken to unfold.<sup>42</sup>

This kind of historiographical genius obviously takes certain liberties in his work when viewed from the strictly factual or “empirical” point of view. But at the same time he cannot create *ex nihilo*. The criterion by which this work will be judged is a conformity to “known properties and generally recognized probabilities.” The plausibility of an historian's work is connected to its possible favorability to the “cause of humanity and virtue” and its salutary effects on “the understandings of those to whom his labors are addressed.” An invigorated yet plausible rendition of past people and events is the means by which the historian can have an impact on “future ages.”

In highlighting some of what he takes to be William Prescott's weaknesses, Simms provides us with a description of a philosophical historian.<sup>43</sup> Simms distinguishes between historians who are

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critics do what they can to promote unbelief and universal spiritual paralysis . . . [but] in no time whatever can they entirely eradicate out of living men's hearts a certain altogether peculiar reverence for great men . . . Hero-worship endures forever while man endures.” Thomas Carlyle, *Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History* (New York: A. L. Burt, n.d.), 14-16.

<sup>41</sup> “True Uses,” 37.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Southern Quarterly Review* 13 (1848): 136-183. Here Simms cites as “living instances” of philosophic historians the French writers Guizot and Michelet. He also cites Gibbon and Thierry as examples of historians who unite “the faculties of the philosophical and narrative historian.”

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“simply narrative” and those who might be truly called “philosophical.” The narrative ones are distinguished by, amongst other virtues, “closeness of detail.” But “the philosophic historian belongs to a more ambitious school.”

He is not so much a narrator as an essayist. His labor is not so much after details as after principles. He disdains minutiae in his search after generalities, and is better prepared with speculation than with fact . . . . He looks not so much to the actions, as to the motives and the moods of rulers; and prefers to hurry over the narrative, which unfolds the downfall of an empire, in order to show how profoundly he can discuss the conditions by which such overthrow became inevitable . . . . His tests are those of the lawyer and the philosopher. He cross examines with the one, and dilates into generalities with the other. He corrects the morals of history, as he exhibits the mistakes of governments and people; showing why and where the ruler falters by what errors of policy—by what weaknesses of judgment—by what severities of sway—by what caprice as of passion, and mistakes of fact. He is in brief a philosopher, who chooses to take history for his subject of analysis, rather than morality or art,—and embodies these, as topics, to which his theme, itself, is rendered tributary.<sup>44</sup>

Simms’s call for a “new history writing” more open to philosophy or ideas of national destiny is echoed by Nietzsche’s insistence that we should never turn our backs on a subject simply because it is familiar. Nietzsche says that we should above all be aware that the deeper value of history “lies precisely in the spirited retelling, enhancing, and heightening of a familiar or even ordinary theme, an everyday tune.” “The true historian must have the power of making the familiar sound like something wholly new.”<sup>45</sup>

Likewise Simms says that “the study of mere facts” must be subordinated to a concern for “our own progress.” There must be an ulterior design to the immersion in the empirical detail. Otherwise one would be absorbed in that which would be “utterly unimportant to ourselves and our children.” There may be a kind of implicit or intrinsic true narrative of history, involving the putting of its myriad facts all in a row, but it is really only “the great moral truths” for which we care and which “induce excellence in the student.”<sup>46</sup>

As an example in this context Simms alludes to the much vexed

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<sup>44</sup> “True Uses,” 37.

<sup>45</sup> “Use and Abuse,” 117-18.

<sup>46</sup> “True Uses,” 37.

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question of “who built the pyramids, Cheops or Cephrenes?” In this particular case the “philosophical historian” looks at the pyramids and sees that they were the work of “a merciless despotism” and constitute “an equal trophy of miserable vanity and of absolute power.”<sup>47</sup> The number and weight of the blocks of stone of which the pyramids were constructed are of secondary importance when compared to the social system that created them or, more precisely, to the human psychology or “philosophical anthropology” that explains the social system which built them. The “veracious chroniclers” can add nothing to the “great moral truth” respecting the pyramids of which we are already in possession. “That moral truth, educed by thought from conjecture, is one wholly independent of details.” Indeed, even if new details come to light which force an adjustment of heretofore accepted facts about the pyramids it would have no impact on the point that they are embodiments of “miserable vanity and absolute power.” The conclusion that they were embodiments of such phenomena is not arrived at through calculations of the time spent, laborers employed, materials used, techniques involved, etc. It is a moral conclusion based on an “inference from the human passions,” to use the language of Hobbes. The various factual details about the pyramids cannot by themselves establish the truth that they were the products of “miserable vanity and absolute despotism.” Thus a change in the factual knowledge concerning them would have no effect on this “moral” claim. To exaggerate Simms’s point for a moment, the only way for the facts to affect the moral claim would be for the pyramids to be shown as having been all along nothing but a few humble huts in the desert inflated by legend into great monuments of stone. Then the conclusion about the vanity and despotism of the Pharaohs may have to be revised, but not otherwise.<sup>48</sup>

But for all the praiseworthiness of the poets’ services to history, Simms hastens to add that there is even a higher level of historiog-

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 39. Simms would see a very clear distinction between scriptural and philosophical history. In scripture there are miracles. Miracles may have an object lesson in the sphere of morality, conduct and character, but their presence in a narrative would take us beyond the bounds of history as Simms presents it here. Simms does not go so far as to say that history is a discipline without boundaries or limits in relation to experienced reality. He very clearly stipulates that the more philosophical historian writes his account only when “the means of his refutation are not to be had.” The philosophical historian “offends against no facts which are known and decisive, no reasonable probabilities or obvious inferences.”

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raphy than that of the Byronic poet. For the poet's historical work gives rise to a passion in others which he himself cannot gratify. As a result "another genius is summoned to continue the progress into the dominions of the obscure and the impalpable," which the poet "fears to penetrate."<sup>49</sup> This genius is the "romancer" or "novelist" who goes beyond the level of "conjecture" that the poetic historian is allowed to the very "liberties of creation." Both the historian and the romancer may well be obliged by a rule that their first duty is "the benefit and blessing of the races which they severally represent," and both have in their care "the holy trusts of art" in its role as a stimulant "to ardency in the grand and unceasing struggle after perfection."<sup>50</sup> But the romancer takes possession of the fruits made possible by the historian's mixture of "doubt and promise."

While the "historian" supplies "the motive for human action where the interests of a state, a nation are concerned," the "romancer" or "novelist" inquires into "the recesses of the individual heart." Both figures should blend clarity of mind and judgment together with "a lively fancy" and a "vigorous imagination." But if the historian's subjects have more "dignity and grandeur," those of the "romancer" have "more delicacy and variety." "Gravity" accompanies the historian because of "the vast interest involved in the discussion." The romancer, on the other hand, has a subject that is more attractive because he can reveal "those more ennobling virtues of the citizen, which, as they are seldom suffered to show themselves beyond the sphere of domestic privacy, are not often permitted to glide into, and relieve the uniform majesty of history." Here Simms ventures the opinion that Sir Walter Scott was "himself a greater historian in some of his novels than in any of his 'histories.'"<sup>51</sup>

Simms is optimistic that even though the modern scientific approach is on the rise, the countervailing view that the greatest historian is "art" itself is gaining ground as well. "Philosophy" now sees that Shakespeare's chronicles of England are as true as those of David Hume, and indeed even truer than those of the latter with respect to "the great and leading characteristics of society and human nature." Sir Walter Scott is now seen to be making the "unnatural and formless" features of "skeleton history" more appropriate

*Shakespeare's  
fictional  
chronicles of  
England truer  
than Hume's  
historical  
chronicles.*

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

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in terms of “symmetry and proportion.” Scott’s *Ivanhoe* had in fact opened the way to more modern research into the history of Saxon-Norman relations by showing that there had been a great struggle for supremacy between the two groups after the Conquest. The poetic historian or “romancer” confers on the narrative of the past a “rich mellowness” which advances “popular thought,” and this in turn will lead to the recovery of “many more perfect narratives concerning periods in our chronicles of which, at this moment, we scarcely acknowledge any want.”<sup>52</sup>

So here we have the case that, regardless of all other considerations, romance, fiction, or, more broadly, “art,” is prior both chronologically and intellectually to scientific history. “No Scott, no Ranke/Niebuhr” is the claim. This being the case, to abandon philosophic-artistic history for the scientific method would be like giving up three square meals a day for frequent intravenous injections supplying the equivalent nutrients to the body. One might endure under such a regimen, but it would completely overturn the way in which life was lived on a human level. There would be no socializing or conversation over the dining table and so forth. The point is that the actual nutrients are a necessary but by no means sufficient condition for a fully human life and are not prior to, but coeval with, such a life.

*Literary art  
prior both  
chronologically  
and  
intellectually  
to scientific  
history.*

We have seen that for Simms art is a “vitative agency.” It is such because the practice of “romantic art” leads to the creation of conjectural histories which “all nations and ages have possessed” and which constitute all that is known about these peoples and times at all. The poet and the romancer make “monuments” from the “epochs” and “materials” available. “Let your grave lovers of skeleton history ask if these questions have ever been answered by the dry-bones for which they dig,” Simms says. For Simms, it is the creative artists who preserve the connection between the past and the present and therewith the future. The “painter” and the “minstrel”

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47. H. Stuart Hughes heartily concurs with Simms here: “If there was an imaginative writer of repute who ‘got things all wrong,’ it was he. Yet his novels of chivalry and ‘derring-do’ (even his vocabulary was phoney) cradled the fancy of generations of future historians. . . . In Ranke’s case, the *Waverley* novels lit a bonfire that blazed for eighty years. Today there must be other historical romances—doubtless much better ‘researched’ than were Scott’s—which are kindling the same wild flame. And a teacher of history would be greatly in error if he should inadvertently put it out.” H. Stuart Hughes, *History As Art And As Science: Twin Vistas On the Past* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 105.

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endure while the “statesman” and the “chronicler” are “dust.” They have no songs which become the songs of a whole people as did those of Scott, Byron, and Shakespeare. What Simms means to say is that the “painter” and the “minstrel” are “the voices for the ages” in that they put the “unfading halo” on the vanished empires and “govern infant nations with a deathless moral.”<sup>53</sup>

*“A national history, preserved by a national poet, becomes, in fact, a national religion.”*

According to Simms, the poetry or romance that deals with “national events” possesses a sort of “symbolical influence upon the people’s minds, and seems indeed, to become a visible form and existence in their eyes.” The “events of a national history, which we can associate with a place and with a name, endowed with vitality by the song of a poet,—will make that place sacred. . . . A national history, preserved by a national poet, becomes, in fact, a national religion.” The “spell of genius” makes sacred “the ruins of time” and in so doing “preserves itself from oblivion.” The “inspired bard” conducts the children down to the fourth and fifth generation “to the high places of glory” and for this they pay him “homage.”<sup>54</sup>

So the artist cheats death both for himself and his country by creating “sacred” things in the national memory. Pericles is the name we associate with the “Funeral Oration” commemorating the fallen Athenian soldiers in the Peloponnesian War, and it is Lincoln’s name that was made immortal at Gettysburg after the battle was over. The names of Pericles and Lincoln “liveth forever more” as a result of delivering a funeral speech in which the names of the soldiers being buried are never mentioned and have long since been forgotten. Perhaps no words in a public speech were destined to be less strictly accurate than those uttered by Lincoln at Gettysburg when he said: “The world will little note nor long remember what we say here; but it can never forget what they did here.” The tones of “The Gettysburg Address” are recognizable to one degree or another by any who have even the most passing knowledge of modern history; but only a minuscule minority of such people could describe the details of “what they did [there]”

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<sup>53</sup> “True Uses,” 48-49. “The antidotes to history are *the unhistorical and the supra-historical*. . . . By the term *historical* I mean man’s skill and power to *forget*, his ability to seclude himself within a limited *horizon*. By *supra-historical* I mean those forces which direct our eyes away from becoming and toward that which gives existence its eternal and unchanging character, toward art and religion” (“Use and Abuse,” 142).

<sup>54</sup> “True Uses,” 54-55.

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in the great battle being commemorated. This fact is a testament to the truth of Simms's claim that the fame of the poet is destined to far outlast that of the historical actors who have served as the raw material for his art.