

Epilogue

Now that we have followed Agatha and her companions through more than three months in Europe and attempted to answer the questions her images and comments provoke, it may have become clear to some readers that I have followed Thornton Wilder in his desire “to pile up a million details of daily living ... it is the business of writing to restore that sense of the whole.”¹ As an archaeologist myself, I concur in his opinion—drawn from his formative experience studying archaeology in Rome—of the archaeologist’s eyes:

An archaeologist’s eyes combine the view of the telescope with the view of the microscope.

He [or she] reconstructs the very distant with the help of the very small.²

As an archaeologist, I attempted to imagine past lives through what remains, taking seemingly mundane items—broken pieces of pottery—and proposed reconstructions of the lives of people thousands of years dead. And I suggest that this attempted reconstruction of Agatha’s 1912 European tour has taken seemingly small mundane items and events and worked to restore a sense of the whole. As indicated earlier, to restore a sense of the whole with facts such as train schedules and ocean crossings and knowledge of the families woven together with supposition and conjecture is a much easier job than singing the lives of prehistoric people (with no written records) out of the potsherds and stone foundations left behind. I suggest that these activities and my archaeological work imagines and assembles and reconstructs histories or past lives from the fragments we have been left. And this reconstruction of stories allows us to honor the dead and their lives.

As a teen-ager I was struck by a quote of Evgeny Evtushenko with which, even at that age, I profoundly disagreed, yet had no idea what course my own interests would take. I used Evtushenko’s words as an epigraph to a poem I composed from a story my grandmother had told me—a poem that was in direct contradiction to Evtushenko, who wrote “They perish. They cannot be brought back. The secret worlds are not regenerated.” I share that school-girl poem here, honoring my grandmother, Constance, who, after all, is the older sister of Agatha and whose engagement apparently caused the plan to send Agatha to Europe. I suggest that both a reconstruction of Agatha’s trip and, after Constance read a previous poem of mine now lost, her sharing the story of her father waking her in the middle of the night prove that, in some fashion, parts of previous lives can be brought back and parts of their worlds regenerated. So today, as a genealogist, I continue to work to regenerate parts of the worlds of the four centuries of my ancestors in this country.

¹ Wilder, 153.

² Wilder, 154.

My Mother's Mother

"We who knew our fathers
in everything, in nothing.

They perish. They cannot be brought back.
The secret worlds are not regenerated."

Evtushenko

Braced by an arm against the cherry desk,
Invincible, though old and stooped and deaf, she speaks.
She's young again with memories and thoughts:

*Asleep, my father gently bids me wake,
(Words and year are blackened spaces in my mind,
This moment though brought back by your poem.)
Now at the stair window I press my face
and see through wispy topaz clouds – chased
by windy phantoms – an Olympian,
autumnal moon. Below, across, above,
untamed geese, arrow-strict, divide the night.*

Her voice drops off, there's nothing left to show ...
The young girl ages swiftly and disappears.
The picture, though, inspired by my school-girl's poem,
is no longer hers alone,
and transmits a corner of her world to me,
an ungenetic immortality.