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William H. Thornton

To cite this article: William H. Thornton (1994) The politics of literary historiography, Journal of Literary Studies, 10:3-4, 425-436, DOI: [10.1080/02564719408530092](https://doi.org/10.1080/02564719408530092)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02564719408530092>



Published online: 06 Jul 2007.



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The Politics of Literary Historiography

William H. Thornton

Summary

This article gives a critical overview of the development of literary historiography, "hard pressed between literature and history proper". It stresses the catalytic impact of realism on historiographic discourse and suggests a blueprint for "postmodern realism".

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel gee 'n kritiese oorsig oor die ontwikkeling van literêre historiografie, "vasgevang tussen letterkunde en 'suiwer' geskiedenis". Dit beklemtoon die kataliserende effek van realisme op historiografiese diskoers en suggereer 'n bloudruk vir "postmoderne realisme".

Textualism on Trial

Literary historiography has long been a disciplinary orphan, hard pressed between literature and history proper. Both boundary disciplines have insisted, in a kind of reverse imperialism, that literary historiography belongs categorically to the other. At the theoretical level, however, much has changed in recent years. This paper will argue that, New Historicism (on the side of literary theory) and the return of "rhetoric" (on the side of historical theory) have eroded what justification there ever was for denying the legitimacy of literary historiography as a serious genre and a critical discipline.

This view is at odds with disciplinary conventions in both fields. From literary perspective the case for literary historiography is already forfeited where mimesis has been negated. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961: 37), Booth noted the bifurcation of modern literary criticism into mutually exclusive camps: one demanding that fiction be mimetic or true to life, and another insisting that it be cleansed of referentiality and other inartistic impurities. In fact, the mimetic faction that Booth cited had been in full retreat for two decades. Wellek and Warren (1942) had promoted this retreat by relegating the "extrinsic" study of literature to the critical ash heap.

The "time spirit" of history, they declared, contributes little more than a bed of lies (1942: 111), namely, the historicist's "fallacy of origins" (p. 61).

The literary text was thus quarantined. This accorded with the apolitical closure that Porter (1990: 254) ties to the "end of ideology" thinking of the post-war period. Booth is quite right that textual isolation did not go unchallenged within literary theory. The most notable challenge, however, came in the wake of Frye's *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), whose paradoxical effect was to extend the orbit of literary isolation to the structure of literature as a whole.

The subsequent appropriation of European critical models, from structuralism to deconstruction, devalued historical representation even further. In *After the New Criticism* (1980) Lentricchia lamented the persistence of New Criticism's formalist legacy, whereby reference to extra-textual "reality" was all but interdicted. Typical of this anti-realism were Miller's confident salvos on "the fiction of the referential" and Eco's derogations of the so-called "referential fallacy" (Dissanayake 1989: x). The success of such "postmodernism" seemed by the late 1970s to resolve Booth's literary critical schism in favour of textualism. That result, along with an aversion to all master narratives, has often been taken as the very essence of postmodernism prompting Graff's (1989: 174) charge that postmodernism harbours "a kind of anti-essential essentialism".

Not only "grand narratives", but virtually all claims to objectivity were denounced. Only gradually did it dawn on social and political reformists that the cognitive implications of postmodernism were on a collision course with reformism of any ilk. This realization first came to feminists and minority activists, and was provoked by revelations concerning the Nazi complicity of Heidegger and Paul de Man (Sheehan 1988: 38; Donaghue 1989 *passim*). The De Man affair naturally invited

the suspicion that his scepticism about the possibility of genuine opposition is a covert apologetic for collaboration.

(Christenson 1990: 444)

Graff (1982) was among the first to point out the oxymoronic character of "textual leftism". Meanwhile Rorty (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 1989) was honing his non-foundational defence of liberal "ironist culture", while conservatives such as Bloom (*The Closing of the American Mind* 1987) voiced opposition to everything associated with postmodernism's "rhetoric of relativism" (Thornton 1991: 22). Given such formidable opposition across the entire political spectrum, it was no longer possible for the deconstructive wing of postmodernism to claim, on the basis of aesthetic

criteria alone, the status of a social and political vanguard.

Post-structuralism had projected,

a rhetoric of rigorous selfconsciousness, only to define selfconsciousness within the narrowest limits, those set by a model of language so implausibly totalized as to render difficult or improper any examination of particular uses of language at the service of particular interests. It has had, in other words, no historical dimension at all

(Simpson 1989: 64)

Jameson's (1981: Forword) injunction, "Always historicize!", captured the mood of these new, post-textualist strictures. Within the ranks of post-modernism there was a scramble to restore social and political solvency by recontextualizing as well as historicizing. Consequently, 1980s' postmodernism would itself be split between philosophies of text and context. The former held stubbornly to the belief that the text is a hermetically non-referential entity, while the latter traced textual meaning to a point of historical origin (Babuts 1992: 65).

Ten years after his confident assault on referentiality, cited above, Miller confirmed the resurgence of Booth's schism in his 1986 Presidential Address to the M.L.A. Here again, after a quarter of a century, was the old polarity in just a slightly different costume: with linguistic-theoretical criticism at one pole and social-material criticism at the other (Montrose 1989: 15). Worse still, Miller was forced to acknowledge that the textual pole of criticism was increasingly on the defensive.

Toward the end of the decade, Miller conceded that

the "era" of "deconstruction" is over. It has had its day, and we can return with a clear conscience to the ... more human work of writing about power, history, ideology, ... and the real lives of men and women in society as they exist in themselves and as they are "reflected" in literature.

(Miller 1989: 103)

To use that of all words - "reflected", connoting mimesis - would have been sheer apostasy a few years earlier; but now Miller himself was so much on the defensive that he could do no better, in his textual salvage operation, than to amalgamate text and context, whereby "extrinsic relations themselves are intrinsic to the text" (Miller 1989: 105).

Miller was not alone in forging this timely link between text and context. Even the *New Historicism* (Veesser 1989: xii) - which claims to restore literature to its full historical complexity - has rarely been so anti-textual as the name might imply. The adoption of post-structural theories of represen-

tation by putative New Historicists such as Tompkins (*Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction* 1985) certainly confuses the issue (Thomas 1989: 184). As a result, many share the opinion of Liu that the *New Historicism* is mired in the same formalism that afflicts deconstruction. In short, these critics consider it just another "version of the movement that first taught criticism how to be embarrassed by history" (Liu 1989: 740, 741).

Others, while granting a degree of kinship between deconstruction and historicism, would defend both by distinguishing a politically responsible deconstruction from its apolitical imitators. Said (1983: 3, 4), for example, holds that by the late 1970s the revolutionary textuality of Derrida and Foucault had been transformed into the "disinfected" textualism of American theory, with its almost categorical rejection of history.

Such "theory", in any case, is definitely on the wane in many sectors of New Historicism. The trend, as Thomas reads it, is toward a more forthright contextualism where "the coupling of 'new' with 'historicism' may well be redundant" (Thomas 1989: 188). Not only is hermetic textualism challenged within literary studies, but across a wide range of homologous disciplines as well. Much as New Historicists refuse to confine the discussion of theme, character, and language to literature proper, so too the discussion of primitive customs is carried beyond anthropology, and the discussion of demographic problems beyond social history (Veesser 1989: xv). A debate over boundaries has divided each discipline internally, with the result that something close to "Booth's schism" has been replicated in each of these fields.

The motive force behind these various schisms is the return of narrativity from its long theoretical exile. This return marks the displacement of pure positivism throughout the social sciences. Typical of this new narrativity is Polkinghorne's argument (*Methodology for the Human Sciences* 1983; *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* 1988) that the social sciences made a serious blunder in mimicking the methods of the natural sciences. Not only has a new "writerly" approach taken hold in social sciences such as anthropology, but it has even gained some respectability within philosophy. Nowhere, however, has the return of rhetoric been more striking than in the case of postmodern historiography. In philosophy, after all, positivism was at least an examined methodology; whereas, as Hughes remarks, modern historiography has been prone to an almost "primitive positivism" (LaCapra 1985: 20), walling off history from literary discourse.

"Total History" and its Enemies

The postmodern turn in historiographic theory has done little to alter routine historiography. Harlan observes that working historians

tend to feel that one should trust one's nose, like a hunting dog. They are afraid that if they once let themselves be distracted by theory they will spend their days wandering in a cognitive labyrinth Literary criticism is clearly the worst of these labyrinths, especially its postmodern version. Historians avert their eyes, but what little they hear confirms their worst fears: literary theory is esoteric, subversive, anarchic - something one should avoid as a matter of intellectual hygiene.

(Harlan 1989: 583)

Well into the post-war era, historians went on dreaming of a "total history" of solidly objective components (LaCapra 1985: 25). This approach was only reconfirmed by the shift, early in the 1960s, from narrative methods of representation to those of structural analysis - albeit a more diachronically flexible structuralism than that associated with Levi-Strauss (Breisach 1983: 375).

Even as this "total history" matured, however, a countermovement was emerging. Kellner (1987: 1) points out that over two decades, roughly from 1965 to 1985, the meaning of all "humanist" texts came under intense scrutiny. History was a special target of suspicion. The dream of a "total" history was clearly dependent upon the "logocentric" assumptions of the prevailing liberal consensus. By the early 1970s, historical theory was in a state of general upheaval (LaCapra 1985: 27). The methodological confidence of a purely analytical historicism had been shattered, making way for the return to the "rhetorical" approach that is commonly associated with White's major works, *Metahistory* (1973) and *Tropics of Discourse* (1978). Although Fischer could confidently proclaim history to be a hard science, and relativism an error, the very anthology containing Fischer's statement (Fletcher's *The Literature of Fact* 1976) also contained a seminal paper by White (later to become a chapter in *Tropics*) refuting such scientism and the "total" history it would augment.

With this "postmodern" turn, "signification" has replaced the naive realism of historical "reproduction". Postmodern theory would retire the traditional goal of "re-covering" the past on its own terms - terms independent of the critical practice of historians. It would have us understand the past as a social construct, and more specifically a rhetorical construct. Since most practising historians have refused to follow this track, the central issue of debate in the last decade has been the epistemic legitimacy of historical

narratives. Norman (1991: 121) points out how this issue quickly "assumed the contours of the realism-constructivism controversy that philosophers of science ... know all too well".

Kellner (1987: 5) shows that with the negative hermeneutics of Derrida, all historical meaning comes to be viewed as false coherence, a logocentric discourse of power rather than truth or reality. He adds that even an historicist defender of "reality" such as Foucault can contribute to this siege on "naturalized" history (p. 7). Like Said, in his *Orientalism*, Foucault carries his defense of the historical "other" so far as to vitiate the communicative task of history, such that every particular "other" is effectively lost into the general "Other" of the inexplicable. Such an extreme stance produces a reverse closure, as totalistic in its own way as the total history it would impugn. This undermines not only traditional historiography but any attempt to mediate history and literature through a responsible literary historiography.

A New Literary-Historical Nexus

A less extreme rhetoric of history is, however, conceivable. Here the relationship between history and literature is moved to the center of historiographic debate (Strout 1992: 153). This more moderate rhetoric is one component of what I shall term postmodern realism. Like ordinary historical realism, postmodern realism adduces a past that is not simply constructed or projected. Its otherness is integral to its reality; but at the same time that profound Otherness removes us from the sphere of traditional realism. To represent the past in such terms requires a high order of literary imagination. That is not to say - as Doctorow sometimes does - that there is no distinguishing the imaginative action of fact and fiction. The difference is not in the type or degree of imagination applied in each case, but in its structural range. As does Jameson's political hermeneutics, postmodern realism operates within the material, infrastructural limits of the "real". Without this limit, historical representation would verge on idealism - or on the cult of language which, according to Rorty (1991: 2), has now replaced "mind" as the antipode of conventional "reality".

Since the past can only be comprehended through textual sources, there is no denying the place of rhetoric and narrativity in both its understanding and representation. Norman (1991: 121) stresses the selectivity that this task involves, for there is no denying the unwieldy scope of its referential range. From the perspective of postmodern realism, the past is so vast and complex, and our instrument of language so weak by comparison, that there is

no contradiction in saying that to represent any part of the past is to suppress those other parts that do not figure in one's rhetorical reconstruction. Every reconstruction is marked by a loss as well as a gain: the loss of that vast historical "other" which is not represented.

Odd as the combination may seem, this viewpoint is at once objective and postmodern. As it emerges, the lines of historiographic debate are gradually shifting from the realist/constructivist dichotomy of the early 1980s to a tripartite division: realist/constructivist/postmodern realist. The thrust of this shift was harbingered by the constructivist realism of Goldstein's *Historical Knowing* (1976). Still thinking in terms of the realist/constructivist dichotomy, Gossman failed to identify Goldstein's stance as a variant of realism. What I term postmodern realism has had its most rigorous historical application with LaCapra's *History and Criticism* (1985), which drew heavily upon the historical theory of White as well as the less excessive implications of Derrida.

At this juncture, Ankersmit (1990b) took constructivist historiography in a new direction by replacing the text/context fixation of literature with a very different historical analogue: that of painting. As Ankersmit summarizes his thesis, the comparison of literature with history recommended itself as a "first strategy" for postmodern historiography due to their shared textual dependence. The inordinate textualism of this likeness has too long been fetishized (Ankersmit 1990b: 259-60). The metaphor of painting more graphically illustrates the postmodern band between style and content, or text and context. Ankersmit (1990a: 286) points out that the reality effects of a Van Eyck painting are heavily style-dependent. We should add that Van Eyck's style not only determines his content but also offers a window on Van Eyck's world, affirming a degree of "objectivity" in the form of a contextual bond of style, content, and postmodern referentiality. This bond can be described as being "enabled" rather than created purely *in vacuo* by the artist's (or viewer's) act of perception.

Meanwhile, the "first strategy" of postmodernist "consensus" could be seen to be forcefully challenged by the neo-realism of Gossmann's recent work. This, as Strout (1992: 153) notes, reverses Gossmann's former position. Gossmann now opposes those who so privilege the deep structures of language that historical writing is irretrievably cut off from the past it would describe. This shift parallels the turn of many scholars away from the fashionable history/fiction merger of the 1970s and early 1980s. Even White, in *The Content of Form* (1987), takes a more moderate position than we associate with his early "poetics". He still emphasizes historical narrativity, but, as Raval (1987: 559, 560) points out, he now shows less concern for the identification of tropes in historical works and more for the role of

narrativity and "allegoresis" (whereby patterns of meaning are generated that would not be available through a literal representation of "facts") both in realistic representation and in the politics of historiography.

Obviously the base line for any literature/history convergence has shifted substantially in recent years. The present debate no longer hinges upon whether history contains a rhetorical dimension. That much tends to be granted under the complementary paradigms of socially constructed reality and rhetorically constructed representation. Even Eagleton, who in *Criticism and Ideology* (1976) stood firm on the "scientific" principles of Marxist historiography, could not resist this paradigm shift. Bennington (1987) notes how just five years after *Criticism and Ideology*, in *Walter Benjamin: Or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (1981: 21), Eagleton was unabashedly describing historical materialism as a "rhetoric".

The most pressing question - given the equally rhetorical nature of history and literature - now stems from the other side of the literature/history nexus. This issue turns upon the degree to which the best referential literature not only utilizes history as a setting (a veritable stage prop) but enters into the thick of historical discourse and debate. To what extent does it cross the line from being merely "historical", as in the case of the classic "historical novel", to become fully "historiographic"? Gossman's faith in the dialectical process of objective historiography comes down to a conviction, in his own words, "that a BETTER STORY could be told" (Seigel 1992: 118). His choice of words reflects the influence of a narrativist poetics, and invites the search for a "better" and presumably more literary form for the telling of that story.

The Politics of "De-realized" Radicalism

Gossman's search, unfortunately, has received little support from literary scholarship. In Todorov's (1977) structuralist poetics, the language of literature is thought to be disengaged from the "illusory transparency" of reality. Reality, however, has lost so much of its transparency that Todorov's words have an anachronistic ring. It is our general crisis of reality, according to Brooke-Rose (1981: 3), which impels today's return to rhetoric. The events of the twentieth century, far more than any literary theory, have precipitated this dilemma. Kermode (*The Sense of an Ending* 1966) may be right that such reality crises have recurred throughout recorded history; yet our particular crisis is compounded by our grasp of the arbitrariness of language and all forms of cultural representation.

This pessimism bears comparison to the "crisis of historicism" that

marked the thought of Troeltsch and Meinecke early in this century (Iggers 1968: 175). So too - as Miller (1972: 419) has noted with special regard to Conrad - nihilism was a powerful antithetical element in the making of literary modernism. Post-structuralists have simply recycled this modernist problem without a modernist solution, and under a new logo have passed this omission off as "radical" postmodernism. Such "radicalism," unfortunately, has little or nothing to say about concrete political issues - and Nussbaum (1989: 59-60) notes its similar obliviousness toward ethical issues.

Confronting their own irrelevance, some post-structuralists have shifted toward a "post/post-structural" call for commitment, social responsibility, and a "politics of recuperation", as Friedman (1991: 465) terms it. So far, however, this reversal has not called into question the post-structural neglect of referentiality and hence of realism. Such anti-realism, far from being "radical", has a deep reactionary cast. As was mentioned, Graff (1982 *passim*) exposed the error of the "left textualist" association of realism with reaction. It has taken nearly a decade for postmodernism to catch up with Graff by admitting that the natural product of a "de-realized" radicalism is a thoroughly de-activated politics.

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