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Author(s): David Simpson

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Is Literary History the History of Everything? The Case for “Antiquarian” History

David Simpson

YES INDEED. IT ALWAYS HAS BEEN, and is perhaps now more so than ever. For the most part our approach has been compulsively inclusive; nothing human or inhuman is alien to us. As a matter of moral and/or professional impulse, scholars and teachers of literature have always wanted to read a world through a text and in a text, even if some have insisted that such is not their business. Efforts at limiting the scope of our professional attentions, whether by textual editors, by deconstruction with its formal-linguistic “rigor,” or by the New Criticism, have always been resisted as pure definitions of the discipline, and have survived principally by being allowed into the company of other and wider-ranging interpretive conventions, as parts of an ever-expanding whole. Old fashioned, restricted literary history conceived as the influence of one writer upon another has lately flourished most visibly in the form of polemical pastiche, in the work of Harold Bloom, rather than as an agreed-upon norm for the present conduct of criticism. Intellectually and philosophically, with or without moral impulse, there seems to be next to nothing that can be safely excluded in an *a priori* way from the historicization of a literary work. The dazzling, unforeseen connections of the best of the “new historicism” merely carry to the max a principle of all literary history.

But then, if literary history is the history of everything, is it definable as a specific occupation, different from the rest of history? If so, how? And if not, what are the professional consequences of dissolving the figment of disciplinary identity into an undifferentiated method applying to all historical inquiry and perhaps all inquiry whatsoever?

This is a question particularly pressing within an academic culture marked by what we might call a “new general method” in the humanities and social sciences. This I take to involve an acceptance by other disciplines (history, philosophy, anthropology, sociology) of the practices (deliberately not “methods”) of literary criticism. Everything now is described as storytelling, as local knowledge, as conversational, and as reflexive and even autobiographical.¹ Sometimes the project of attending to the past is

completely supplanted by the literary critic's urge to tell us about him or herself: hence the current spate of autobiographies by academics who lead, for the most part, alas, not very interesting lives. At other times there is a wholesale retreat into the past as if it were the present—the diary, the conversation, the dense empirical field, the illusion of “being there.” Thus we have either no history at all or the image (it is only ever that) of total history: history as full presence, and thus no longer history.

Many of us still work somewhere in between, with all the problems thereby entailed. But there is a perceptible drift away from engaging those problems. The appeal of cultural studies is partly to be explained by its veneer of *relevance*; it seems to be about the here and now, and about the experience of everyone and not just that of the devotees of a high literacy based in the reading of complex written texts. But the “presentism” that now dominates the current version of cultural studies (very different from the early prototypes of Raymond Williams; perhaps more like that of the Birmingham School) is also a relief from history, and from the very real problems of doing history. Leavened by the familiar postmodern notion of the end of history (in the liberal version) or its redundancy for a new global culture of spatial simultaneity (in the more common leftist-anarchist version), much of cultural studies has no need for history, which tends to appear, if it appears at all, in parodic or reductive form as a history of some uncontested hegemony (orientalism, sexism, homophobia, Eurocentrism, and so on) which it is the critic's task to expunge from the present by the fierce light of radical intelligence.

All of us, then, who worry about the tasks required of literary history are by definition, in the present academic culture of the United States at least, to be counted among the old farts. My aim here is not to offer a brave new way forward for literary history. Indeed, I currently believe that the project is characterized by an insoluble antinomy. Instead, I will try to remind us of the labors of doing literary history before they are forgotten completely in the drive toward presentist affirmation that may be our inevitable professional profile as we respond to a decline in high-cultural capital and political-financial resources. This reminder will probably not then have the effect of inspiring any new directions. But I hope it will serve as an example of the continuing value of certain sorts of skepticism and inconclusiveness; homage not to the ineffable complexities of literature itself (we've had plenty of that, though it is still at times useful to hear it again), but to the very describable difficulties of thinking of literature as historical.

These difficulties are not to be solved or avoided by invoking the hitherto least controversial sorts of historical formations: publishing histories, textual variants, genres and rhyme schemes, writerly influences. But neither are such topics to be ignored. Indeed, they may be more useful than ever for a generation of students more resistant than before (often for reasons beyond their control) to the experience and cultivation of patience. The slow accumulation of apparently uncontingent information—that is, information whose contingency is not immediately evident—is not to be dismissed. It is this more than anything that gives us, if it can be had at all, a sense of the past *as* past. To do this work, and to do it well, is much. And it is the source of whatever basic training we are going to give or get in formal and historical skills and vocabularies, and in the analysis of complex documents. These talents as taught to undergraduates are, moreover, still very marketable in the very employment sectors we tend to blame for the current demise of traditional literary studies, and to fail to teach them is to disadvantage our students in these quotidian ways as much as it is to rob them of the experience of challenge and difference that the university ought, in my view, to provide.

This retrieval of information not instantly validated by presentist urgencies may seem to belong to what Nietzsche called “antiquarian” history: the indiscriminate preservation of everything just because it is old (73-74). We should not feel it that way, however, because nothing can be deemed, in an *a priori* way, irrelevant to some context or other for literature, whether in its mechanical production or in its referential aura. So we have to gather it in just in case, like Boswell recording every item he could find about and around Samuel Johnson, knowing that what seemed trivial to him might seem important to someone else. This process is indefinite, whether we organize it by moving out from the meanings and allusions of writing, or by way of an account of the material and cultural situations impinging upon writing (editions, reading publics, social affiliations, and so forth).

We think of these kinds of history as relatively stable, because we can latch on to some relatively uncontroversial facts once in a while, and because such facts are so much more precise than the other kind of history we try to write, that of the subject, the “author.” Their apparent precision allowed Gustave Lanson, in an essay recently translated, to believe in apprehending “the past in the past—and as the past,” in a way uncontaminated by what he calls “subjective criticism” (224-25). If we are not engaged in evaluating the relation of past literature to ourselves, nor in describing individual writers or writings in terms other than those of “so-

cial configurations" and "collective life" (228, 234), then we can hope for an objective sociological method.

It is easy to query this position from within a contemporary orthodoxy that understands *all* history, no matter how minute, as motivated history. It may, for example, be indisputable that the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was published in 1798 and cost 5 shillings. But what we make of this item of information is still motivated by an interest in making a certain sort of sense rather than another (the price of the book was, after all, deemed uninteresting to generations of readers and critics). At the same time, we cannot claim that it actually cost 12 shillings, without indulging in perversity. And so, it seems, Lanson is right. This is the past in the past, and as the past. What we make of the information is subject to all the familiar hermeneutic conundra, but the accumulation of this kind of basic information should not, it seems, cause us to worry overmuch.

Or should it? Lanson describes literary history as operating below the level of "laws and generalizations," content with the "preparation of facts and particular relations" (225). But at what point does the one turn into the other? There is no simple answer. I am not going to suggest that *Lyrical Ballads* did not cost 5 shillings. Nor that there are not other indisputable items of a similar nature—the size of the print run, of the advance, the nature of the contract, the format of the volume, and so forth. But we run out of these relatively soon. (All the more reason why we should hang on to them.) Alas, even apparently uncontroversial details can be deceptive: that is why there is a tradition of forgery, and why forgery can always be attributed even when it has not occurred. In other words, if there is a powerful motive for misrepresentation, nothing is out of bounds.

Following on from this, we might say that the credibility of a supposed historical fact increases in direct proportion to its perceived irrelevance, its standing outside any apparent field of motivation. In its literary form this is analogous to the realism effect, the technique of *vraisemblance*: it is the irrelevance of certain items in a story to its narrative that communicates the effect of the real: why would they be described at all if they were not "true"? Thus you believe me when I say that *Lyrical Ballads* cost 5 shillings, because you can find no motive for my not telling the simple truth. But I could be fooling you. Or I could have made a mistake, thus inadvertently repositioning the volume in its economic field. Time and again, we critics rely on the authority of other people's facts as the raw material for our interpretations, because we cannot imagine that they could be lying, or that they made a mistake. There are not that many lies in the relatively unimportant sphere of literary history, though there have been

some.² But there are a lot of mistakes, enough to suggest that the division of labor proposed by Lanson cannot be relied upon by careful literary historians. If the goal of this kind of historical inquiry is absolute knowledge (absolute because the terms are very simple and limited—like the cost of a book), then everything has to be checked again and again. (Textual editors are used to the reproduction of mistakes in successive editions, each taking its predecessor as its source). My point: that the simplest level of historical information takes a lot of work to verify, even before we ponder its significance. Mostly we trust each other. But then we are back in the realm of consensual, constructed knowledge based in guild solidarity. As soon as we realize this, then we have left the comforting rhetoric of indisputable information for a life of constant vigilance. And, again: the most secure knowledge may be the most useless, its security dependent on its uselessness.

Lanson, we remember, guaranteed his kind of literary history by avoiding “subjective criticism.” By this he meant the presentist evaluation of writing as good or bad, enlightening or not, in the eyes of whoever is reading. But he was also avoiding, by implication, the subject who is the writer, the human being from and through whom writing occurred in the past. This person can be talked about insofar as s/he is symptomatic of a communal tendency, a sociology. But not otherwise. Roland Barthes made this clear, again, in 1960: “history will never tell us what is happening inside an author at the moment he is writing” (156). Thus “literary history is possible only if it becomes sociological, if it is concerned with activities and institutions, not with individuals” (161). Notwithstanding the efforts of a number of theorists to dissolve this individual *into* activities and institutions—efforts we refer to with false affirmation as the “death” of the subject—Barthes’s point remains the critical point. (The subject was never dead, only asleep.)

Literary works and individuals can only ever be related by adverting to some or other psychology or sociology. Each may carry some conviction, but it cannot be absolute and cannot contain that “excess” of literature that is the product of untraceable motivations. The psychological approach, Barthes proposes, substitutes the critic-analyst’s motives for those of the subject, and produces only false coherence and hypothesis; hence, we might add, the unwieldy pseudo-comprehensiveness of Sartre’s account of Flaubert in *The Family Idiot*. The sociological approach, correspondingly, will produce a different sort of coherence, but it will not be that of literature, but of the discipline of history (itself now controversial in literary

ways)); hence, perhaps, the Baudelaire who emerges from Benjamin's *Pas-sagenwerk* as, necessarily, incomplete, available only in pieces.

Barthes concludes by pointing out the inevitability of frustration for any literary history that seeks to describe literature: literature *is* the institutional form *for* subjectivity, and subjectivity is itself defined as indescribable, as the space of freedom within a culture tending otherwise to containment. As an incoherent assemblage of biological and cultural energies, each open to indefinite mutual recombinations or failed combinations that can register at various points on the scale from general experience to complete idiosyncrasy, the "subject" can never be apprehended, however often it is interpellated and in whatever terms (language, desire, class, gender and so on). Criticism, when it has not allowed itself to believe in the dissolution of the subject, has made major efforts to track it down, but the goal of absolute knowledge is always betrayed both by the antinomian nature of the subject described and by that of the subject doing the describing. Coherence and new sense often come, indeed, from a conjunction of the one with the other, so that a strongly motivated present interest "discovers" (with all the questions thus raised) a new motivation in or context for past writing.³

But we are always engaged with the part and not the whole.

Literary history, then, has to be the history of everything and in this way risks being the history of nothing. It tends toward that condition described by Nietzsche: "a man who wanted to feel historically through and through would be like one forcibly deprived of sleep, or an animal that had to live only by rumination and ever repeated rumination" (62). The "facts" that we do have in our projects thus function both as items for good faith interpretation and as sleeping pills, sources of temporary release from the nightmare of total recall, life without forgetting. Along with the "antiquarian" history that preserves everything for its own sake, and the "monumental" history that produces a simplified series of exemplary moments (for us this usually means "great books"), Nietzsche identifies a "critical" history that functions by destroying and forgetting pieces of the past and in this way allowing life to go on (75-76).

This critical history is the most familiar to us now and the most frequently validated; it is what licenses our *use* of the past as raw material for the present. But it is also what "destroys," being "always unmerciful, always unjust" (76). This critical history is what fuels our attributions and assumptions of monolithic inheritances and simplified traditions, all the negative "isms" whose displacement is our current work in the academy. As such, it is no less reifying than monumental history, and shares with it

the tendency to level everything to the same standard. The fight between the “great books” defenders and the “political” critics is often one between equals and opposites, the one faction believing in eternal standards of excellence and the other in historically uniform expressions of culpability. Both, perhaps, need a good dose of antiquarian history: an excess of unasimilated information.

But our professional situation is, as I have said, not conducive to the sorts of patience required for the assimilation of such information. The culture of postmodern presentism that makes the past itself dubiously relevant is also anti-theoretical, in the extended sense of theory, the exploration of which requires similar reserves of space, time and disinterest to those called for by the antiquarian archive with which, indeed, such theory must be intimately involved. Add to this the professional urgency felt by a sector of the academy (literary studies) that is only insecurely hegemonic—that is, omnipresent in the new general method *within* the humanities sector of the universities, but under sustained inspection and even attack both from without and within precisely for the presentism I have been describing—and you do not have a climate for the sustained and inevitably slow growth of a new literary history, especially one characterized by the apparent methodological dead ends I have also been describing.

To resurrect such visibly non-conclusive knowledge as the goal of higher education would be hard going indeed in an age of accountability, though it can perhaps be supplied with its own kind of charisma that we would be ill-advised to ignore and have hardly begun to explore. (Veblen opined a hundred years ago that the appeal of professional humanities study lay precisely in its uselessness, and thus in its availability for the arbitrary signification of excess wealth and leisure.⁴ We would probably now have to do better than this, by arguing, for example, for the uses of inconclusive and nonapplied knowledge, as I.A. Richards and others have done.)

What kinds of literary history can we then expect, if any, and what have we recently had? The spate of textual editing generated by the “boom” years will likely slow down, and already threatens to do so. Biography, as a profitable sector of the book market affording the pleasures of coexistence with the great and the good, will likely survive. But high-level literary history has not been a flourishing genre. In 1970, Hans Robert Jauss noted the decline of the grand-narrative style of literary history, with its roots in nation-state formation and justification and its confidence in the power of literature to represent those forces.⁵ This is quite reasonably

deemed unsuited to our present age, with its commitment to deconstructing the nation and resurrecting those voices silenced by myths of national destiny. (Our grand narratives are thus those of negation.)

We have of course had the “new historicism,” of which much has been written in praise and blame. More neutrally, its inevitability, or at least its symptomatic status for a generation generally hostile to history itself, should be recognized. New historicists have been noticed for their eschewal of grand theory and their alternative reliance upon anecdote and happenstance; for their immersion in the empirical plenitude of antiquarian history, from which items are plucked like rabbits from a hat, which turn out to illuminate a more traditionally “major” text or topic; and for their general effacement of hermeneutic problems about doing history in favor of the sheer vividness of the data of history. Nietzsche hoped for just such a history, one whose value would not lie in “general propositions” but in its “taking a familiar, perhaps commonplace theme, an everyday melody, and composing inspired variations on it, enhancing it, elevating it to a comprehensible symbol, and thus disclosing in the original theme a whole world of profundity, power and beauty” (92). William James remarked also the “innumerable little hangings-together of the world’s parts within the larger hangings-together” and made them typical of the way the world works (64).

It is within this climate of expectation, wherein grand narrative is morally discredited and (perhaps more important) massively difficult to perform, that the anecdote and the contingent connection do their work.⁶ Lévi-Strauss wrote of biography and anecdote as “low-powered history,” requiring subsumption within a “form of history of a higher power” for significant intelligibility. But he also noted that while low-powered history is the least explanatory, it is “the richest in point of information, for it considers individuals in their particularity and details for each of them the shades of character, the twists and turns of their motives, the phases of their deliberations” (261). Low-powered history—a very “literary” history in that it is like literature itself—has been the preferred history of recent years. So that the emphasis in recent literary history has been on the *literary* and not the history. Could it have been otherwise? Should it have been otherwise? Opinions have varied and will vary, according to the degree to which they preserve an anachronistic faith in the totalizing project of a single history as outlined by Sartre and by the European Marxist tradition, whereby low-powered history must always move to a higher power, or as they believe that low-powered history is all we can hope for in an age for which history in general is anathema—for a variety of persons and for a

variety of reasons. It may be that those of us who want a history at all, of any kind, are hopelessly remote from the minds of the new generation: old farts one and all, Marxist or new historicist. But in this little spot of earth that is the research university, we still have space and time, for the time being, to think about these things, and to argue about them as if our conclusions had serious consequences. Perhaps they do. I hope so.

We want a history: we—some of us—desire one, whether for the legitimation of our efforts within a narrative of progress or at least of coherence; or for the temporary release from present pressures in the contemplation of a past shorn of all its discomforts; or from a strangely subjective and therefore ultimately indescribable fellow-feeling for those long-dead who left us their writings, the most concentrated form of what we, too, try in our low-powered way to perform. So we want a history in that other sense: we lack one, as everyone does, and thus we have before us a space for infinite composition and endless mediation and meditation (and perhaps, even now, for professional accreditation and advancement).

There are many literary histories, with innumerable foundations, all shaky in the ways I began by describing, but all indispensable to us, insofar as we remain traditional scholars and critics. Whether they matter to others, I'm not sure, so I predict uncertain futures. But it may be that the most trivial and least accountable motive for wanting history, that pertaining to ancestor-worship (in its desacralized but not always diminished forms) and to the authorization of one's present situation, has not disappeared. I was surprised to see that, in the legal debate surrounding the passing and subsequent suspension of Amendment 2 to the constitution of the state of Colorado (a measure singling out gay and lesbian persons as not covered by certain protective clauses—the definitions themselves were hotly contested and unclear), there erupted a passionate exchange, complete with expert witnesses, about what Plato did and did not say about homosexual love. In other words, the cultural capital of Plato and ancient Greece still counted for something, even if opportunistically, in the clarification of a present condition.

Most of us scholars and critics, I suspect, do not fully know why we are preoccupied with the past, and thus with literary history. The aptness of Stephen Greenblatt's famous identification of a "desire to speak with the dead" lies precisely in its imprecision.⁷ Certainly, the conviction that history (and therefore literary history) *matters* must now have become rather shaky. So that we are left somewhat insecure in our legitimation procedures. It is perhaps in its entanglement with the history of everything that literary history finds its best justification.

Pedagogically speaking, the pursuit of a careful literary history offers not a confident narrative (others will do that) but an experience of limited satisfaction and frequent arrestation in saying things about the past and, now more than ever, a continual and always (by definition) unsatisfactory speculation about the origins and implications of acts of mind in the present. The perceived gap between past and present is greater than it used to be thought in the days when we could, with good ethical and epistemological conscience, chronicle either the emergence of a national culture or its obverse in class struggle and roads not taken. We can no longer claim, as Husserl still could in the crisis of the 1930s, that the perception of a "unitary meaning" to history would be consonant with the posture of "radical self-understanding," each following from the other (14, 17). Unitary meaning and radical self-understanding have both been exposed as myths. Understanding, then, is going to be defined in terms of possible or multiple meanings and radical self-doubt.

We cannot fetishize "antiquarian" history as a solution to our problems, but it is a restraint upon despair or chaos. It is the more intellectually fertile the more resistant it remains to appropriation within monumental or critical histories. At a time when history in general is increasingly deemed irrelevant, the explicitly conservationist mission of antiquarian history may be our best hope for having something to work with should history ever again become a matter of urgent concern. Against the explicitly but restrictively political mandates of critical and monumental histories, antiquarian history holds out the ideal of disinterest, even as disinterest is deemed no longer possible. As such, it is minimally political and therefore available for alternative and unpredictable politics in an imagined future.

Faced with a generation inclined to believe in an end to history, the task of historians of all kinds is first of all one of preservation. Literary historians are especially pressured because of the subsistence of "literature" within an ethos of presence and presentism whose effect is always to dissolve the historical into the immediate. Given the general disposition of literary criticism toward advocacy, prophecy and testimony, even of chaos itself, literary history enacted under the banner of antiquarianism, skepticism and hesitation may not win many converts. Never mind. If we can hang on to its practice in this age of accountability, we may have the satisfaction of holding out an option for an intellectual activity not generally available in the education sector.

Moreover, if we are indeed about to return, in our weariness at the pursuit of microscopic localisms in approved postmodern style, to a new

kind of grand narrative—that typified, for example, by a faith in something called global culture (a faith that was perhaps never completely abandoned) and in an end to history,⁸ then there might be a useful polemical function to our inconclusive literary histories. I, at least, cannot quite think the thing farewell. I am not betting on futures, but there is nowhere I'd rather be for now.

University of California, Davis

NOTES

1. On this topic, see my *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature: A Report on Half Knowledge* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

2. See, for instance, Thomas James Wise's forgeries of nineteenth-century editions as reported in Richard D. Altick, *The Scholar Adventurers* (New York and London: The Free Press and Collier-Macmillan, 1966) 37-64.

3. I have explored this syndrome in *Subject to History: Ideology, Class, Gender*, ed. David Simpson (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991) 1-33, 163-90.

4. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1899) 363-400.

5. Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 3.

6. I have written at length on the anecdote in *The Academic Postmodern*, 41-71.

7. Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988)

1. Greenblatt's chapter "Invisible Bullets" (21-65) is well known as a *tour de force* of new historical criticism. It moves deftly between the texts of high and low cultures and between different genres as it comments on the plays of Shakespeare; and it implies (without developing) a relation between its historical material and the critics's present in its thesis about the contained or licensed subversiveness of colonialist ideology (35, 37, etc.) which, whether or not it describes the sixteenth and seventeenth century, certainly rings true as a perspective on the condition of the late twentieth century literature professor in America. This conjunction cannot be pushed to the point of theorization without, of course, destroying the elegance of the essay and the credibility of its history; but neither can it be ignored by a critic sensitive to the preoccupations of presentist consciousness. So it is registered as a persisting hint, and small chink in the facsimile of "history."

8. This is the argument of Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Modern, Anti, Post, and Neo," in *New Left Review*, 210 (1995), 63-101.

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